

BIROBIDZHAN: MOTIVES FOR THE SUPPORT OF THE
JEWISH AUTONOMOUS OBLAST

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Russian
and the Honors College of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

July 6, 1994

APPROVED:



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An Abstract of the Thesis of

Micol Veronique Hutchison for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the department of Russian to be taken August 1994

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There were three groups which encouraged the creation of a Jewish autonomous territory in Birobidzhan, Russia: the Soviet government, certain Soviet Jews, and a few Jewish American organizations. Within the government, there were motives beneficial to the Jews, motives to strengthen the Soviet state, and anti-Semitic motives. The Soviet Jews adopted these first two motives, while the foreign organizations embraced only the first.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of my advisors for their assistance with my thesis. Specifically, I want to thank Professor Kimball for all of his suggestions, comments, and time. Also, thank you to Professor Yurevich, one of the only people on the University of Oregon campus who has even heard of Birobidzhan, for his plethora of information. I would like to thank Tanya Gorokhovskaya not only for her help with my thesis, but for first instilling in me a love of the Russian language and culture. Finally, an added thank you to Nathan, who served as my constant and responsive sounding board.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1920's, the Soviet government created a plan to establish for the Jews a homeland in the Far East, near the major Soviet city of Khabarovsk. The location selected, Birobidzhan, was far from any Jewish cultural centers, in an undeveloped region of a politically disputed area. These facts, especially in retrospect, make Birobidzhan seem a most unattractive and impractical prospect for Jewish settlement. However, the Birobidzhan plan in its first years was met with enthusiasm and support from three groups: the Soviet government, certain Soviet Jews, and some organizations of foreign Jews. The motives, or reasons, that these groups supported the creation of Birobidzhan as an agricultural homeland are varied, but they are all related to one another in three broad categories.

The first category consists of motives beneficial to the Jews, in light of their social and economic struggles. The second category contains motives which classified the development of Birobidzhan as a contribution to the growth and security of the Soviet Union, and came as a result of Birobidzhan's volatile location. The final category, most frequently discussed, encompasses all motives which can be viewed as anti-Semitic, including the fact that Birobidzhan was a harsh and distant place to which to send thousands of Jews. The Soviet government is the only group whose diverse and often incongruous initial motives fall into all three categories. All of

these categories, and how the Soviet government embodied them, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

In the third chapter, I will examine the reasons that a number of Soviet Jews supported this unprecedented and poorly prepared plan in its first years. These Jews' motives fall neatly into the pro-Jewish first category and pro-Soviet second category. And in fact, these self-preserving and patriotic reasons were exactly what the Soviet government conveyed to the Jewish people in the USSR; the existence of any anti-Semitic motives were not acknowledged by these Jews.

The last part of the initial support for Birobidzhan came from foreign Jews in the West, in particular the American organizations Icor and Ambijan. Like the Soviet Jews, the foreign Jews did not embrace or recognize the whole scope of the Soviet government's motives; in fact, they saw an even smaller part than did the Soviet Jews. The foreign organizations supported Birobidzhan solely on the basis of the motives in the first category: those profitable to the well-being of the Jews in the Soviet Union. Chapter Four will elaborate on the sentiments and motivations of these organizations.

These three groups expressed their support in different ways: the government through propaganda, the Soviet Jews through immigration to Birobidzhan, and the foreign Jews through financial support. Each of these groups contributed to the fact that Birobidzhan, though it never became a

truly Jewish homeland, survived as it did through the decade following World War II.

Before discussing the motives for supporting Birobidzhan of each of these groups, I will give a limited description of Jewish life and agriculture in Russia and the Soviet Union, a brief explanation of Soviet policy towards minorities, and a history of the Birobidzhan area in Chapter One.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Throughout Russian history, Jews have been a visible minority of significant size, with a population at one time reaching six million in the Russian Empire. The issue of what rights and restrictions were to be placed on them was debated for centuries.

During the tsarist rule in Russia, until the 1917 revolutions, the rights of the Jews were heavily restricted. They were required to live within an area called the Pale of Settlement (see map), which had been established in 1791 by Catherine the Great. Consequently, Jews could not live in the major cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, except by special permission (a privilege granted to very few). Within the Pale, movement was forbidden after 1882. Work and trade outside of the small Jewish communities were prohibited. Participation in regional politics was barred. Quotas were set for Jews in secondary schools and universities. Because they could not own their own land, agricultural work was nearly impossible.¹

As a result of these conditions, Jews lived in impoverished communities in small, exclusively Jewish towns called shtetls. Fifty percent of the workers in the shtetls were employed as small traders. The rest were mainly artisans or pious Jews who spent their lives with religious studies and were supported by the community; this latter group is estimated to be an

¹Theodore Norman, An Outstretched Arm (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) Ch. 1.

eighth of the male population of the shtetls.²

Although much of the land within the Pale of Settlement was fertile and ideal for agricultural pursuits, Jews were not traditionally employed in farming. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, many Jews, both in Russia and abroad, were beginning to think that agricultural settlement was the key to helping Russian Jews remove themselves from their poverty. By the turn of the century, many Jews had already begun to establish farming settlements on leased land in the Ukraine and the Crimea. In 1916, there were approximately 39,000 Jewish colonists in the Pale.³

The 1917 revolution, however, hindered the settlement of Jews on the land. Those who had already established farms prior to the revolution lost their land, animals, and equipment to the Red and White Armies, or were forced to sell these possessions in exchange for food and money to survive. Others, who had planned to settle on the land, found themselves within the chaos of both a world war and a civil war. During this period, two unprecedented events occurred: the Pale was abolished and all discriminatory laws of the old Russian Empire were abolished.⁴ With this new freedom, many Jews left the former Pale of Settlement and moved to the big cities.

Shortly after the conclusion of the civil war in 1921, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced by V.I. Lenin, head of the Soviet state. The

²American Icor Commision, Report (New York: Icor, 1929) 5.

³Norman, 135.

⁴Nora Levin, The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917 (London: I. B. Taurus, 1988) Ch.1.

enactment of NEP, a policy which lasted until the late 1920's, was an effort to give the new state a chance to strengthen itself and its economy after the strains of World War I and the civil war. It gave Soviet citizens an opportunity to take part in business, trade and private ventures. Private farming in particular was encouraged, and in the 1920's, many Jews, now able to lease large plots of land and sell their produce for profit, began farming. Of these new farmers, only twenty percent had any prior farming experience.⁵

The Soviet Union established organizations to work with the Jews within its borders, regarding both general Jewish affairs and agricultural assistance. The first such organization was Evseksiia, which was originally responsible for all matters pertaining to Jews within the Soviet state. However, it was clear from the start that Evseksiia's main priority was to woo Jews from their small communities into the Communist party. Evseksiia was too busy targeting religion and the rabbinate to address the issue of Jewish agricultural work.⁶ Consequently, a separate organization was founded with the sole purpose of helping Jews to settle on the land. This government branch, Комитет по Земельному Устройству Трудящихся Евреев, or the Committee for Settling Jewish Toilers on the Land (KOMZET), was formed August 29, 1924.

Soon thereafter, in January 1925, a second organization was formed:

⁵Norman, 136.

⁶Lionel Kochan, The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917 (New York: Oxford Press, 1978), 64-70.

Всесоюзное Общество по Земельному Устройству Трудящихся Евреев в СССР, or the All-Union Society for Settling Jewish Toilers on the Land of the USSR (OZET). OZET was a non-government body which, according to government plan, would work with KOMZET to settle Jews on the land. The chair of OZET was Yuri Larin, a well-known economist. Other members included both Jewish and non-Jewish Bolsheviks, foreign affairs commissar Georgii Chicherin and Central Executive Committee chairman Mikhail Kalinin.

Along with KOMZET and OZET, there were a number of foreign organizations working to help Jews establish themselves on the land and offering assistance to specific projects. The three main foreign organizations working independently of the Soviet government to help Jews agriculturally were the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), the American Jewish Joint Agricultural Corporation (Agrojoint), and Общество Распространения Труда среди Евреев, or the Society for the Promotion of Trades and Agriculture among Jews (ORT). All three of these organizations contributed farming equipment and supplies to Crimean and Ukrainian Jewish settlers through the 1930's.⁷

JCA was established in 1891 in London. At the turn of the century, it began actively encouraging Jews to become farmers throughout the world. By 1925, it was working in the Ukraine, where it helped establish vocational

⁷Norman, 147.

schools and farming instruction.⁸ In other parts of the world, it helped fund factories, as well.

Agrojoint was formed by the Joint Distribution Committee in 1924 and worked in the Ukraine until 1932. It raised ten million dollars in the United States to help settle Jews on the land in the Ukraine and the Crimea in 1924-1928. During this period, loans were available from Agrojoint, through foundations established by JCA, to impoverished Russian Jews who intended to settle on the land in Southern Russia. Between 1924 and 1932, Agrojoint helped settle more than 250,000 Russian Jews on the land in the Ukraine and Crimea.⁹ In 1928, Agrojoint became the only one of these three organizations-- JCA, ORT, and Agrojoint-- to assist settlement in Birobidzhan.

ORT, founded in 1880, also supported vocational schools and sent supplies to the Ukraine and Crimea. By the end of the 1920's, it had shifted its focus from agriculture to industry.

The fourth major foreign organization assisting in the settlement of Jews on the land was more closely tied to the Soviet state. Icor, established in 1924 in the United States, worked until 1928 to help agricultural settlement in Southern Russia. In this year, it ceased its work in the Ukraine and began concentrating on the development of Birobidzhan. In 1929, Icor, with the cooperation of the Soviet government, did a field investigation of the Birobidzhan area, which will be discussed later.

⁸Norman, 136.

⁹Norman, 139.

The final noteworthy organization was Ambijan, the American Committee for the settlement of Jews in Birobidzhan, established in 1934 specifically to help Jews settle in Birobidzhan. Though it was created quite a few years after the abovementioned foreign organizations, it was the most active in Birobidzhan. Ambijan was not as active as Agrojoint or Icor regarding agricultural development. Though Ambijan contributed farming equipment and supplies to Birobidzhan, its focus was broader and included schooling, transportation and non-agricultural employment.

Encouraging the work of the foreign organizations, KOMZET, individually initially and later jointly with OZET, sought an area within the Soviet Union suitable for a large Jewish agricultural settlement. Based on the high concentration of Jews in Southern Russia-- the Ukraine and the Crimea-- it seemed like the most logical place for such a settlement. It was OZET's original intention to settle Jews on the land in this area. More specifically, they aimed to help half a million Jews make the transition into agricultural work in the Ukraine and Crimea. Two of the advantages of this area, acknowledged by OZET and other organizations, were its fertile soils and modern roads.

However, the Soviet government found problems with the Ukraine and Crimea. Northern Crimea, which was a popular choice, and where small Jewish communities already existed, was inhabited also by large groups of

Tatars and Ukrainians. According to a number of undocumented sources, these groups were opposed to large-scale Jewish settlement.

Another obstacle to settlement in the Crimea or the Ukraine came from the government. According to historian S. Schwarz, the fact that anti-Semitism was on the rise in the Soviet Union played a role in the waning interest in Crimean settlement within government circles. As Kalinin expressed, there was a fear by the non-Jews in the Crimea that "евреям отдают Крым"¹⁰ ["they were giving the Crimea to the Jews"].

Though the exact fears and motivations of the government cannot be proved, it is clear that there were concerns surrounding the idea of settling large groups of Jews in the South. A less populated area with plenty of land would offer fewer obstacles. As the Icor study explains,

the scarcity of free... land in the Ukraine and Crimea offered an obstacle for such concentrated colonization and it became necessary to find within the Soviet Union a large continuous area of land which would be best suited for the purpose.¹¹

After a 1927 study led by Soviet agricultural specialist B. L. Brook, Birobidzhan was chosen as the location meeting these criteria. Located on in the Far East, on the Soviet- Manchurian border (see map), Birobidzhan had no history of Jewish settlements or communities. Nonetheless, it was intended to become the center of Jewish agricultural settlement.

¹⁰С. Шварц, Книга о Русском Еврействе (Нью Йорк: Союз Русских Евреев. 1968) 164.

¹¹American Icor Commision, 9.

A number of members of KOMZET and OZET, as well as of Evseksiia, were critical of this proposal. For example, KOMZET members Yuri Larin and Abraham Bragin felt that the climate was too harsh and the area too far from Jewish cultural centers.¹² Despite this opposition, the Birobidzhan proposal was accepted in the government. Through 1929, 22.5 million rubles, 16.7 million of it from foreign sources¹³, had been spent in an effort to help settle Jews on the land in the Ukraine and Crimea, and now hopes and funds were being turned towards Birobidzhan.

Autonomous Areas for Minorities in the Soviet State

The concept of settling the Jews on the land was not new, and neither was the idea of creating a homeland for them within Russia. Almost sixty percent of the population in Russia was of non-Russian ethnicity,¹⁴ and the problem of how to cope with this complexity had existed long before the emergence of the Soviet state.

In response to this issue, Lenin proposed establishing autonomous areas for the Soviet state's minorities. Even before the creation of the Soviet state, he wrote,

¹²Jacob Lvavi and Shimon Redlich, "Birobidzhan," Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Judaica Press, 1972).

¹³Шварц, 163-4.

¹⁴Thomas Riha, Readings in Russian Civilization (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) 442.

Несомненно, наконец, что для устранения всякого национального гнета крайне важно создать автономные округа, хотя бы самой небольшой величины, с цельным, единым, национальным составом, причем к этим округам могли бы «тяготеть» и вступать с ними в сношения и свободные союзы всякого рода, члены данной национальности, рассеянные по разным концам страны или даже земного шара. Все это бесспорно, все это можно оспаривать только с заскоружло-бюрократической точки зрения.¹⁵

[It is without doubt that in order to abolish all national oppression it is important to create autonomous areas, even if they are of the smallest size, each with a uniform national composition, to which the members of the given nationality, living in different parts of the country or even world, could "gravitate" and there enter into relations and and free association of every kind. All of this is indisputable, all of it could be disputed only from a callous bureaucratic point of view.]

This idea was further developed and put into practice by the commissar of nationalities under Lenin, Josef Stalin, and later during Stalin's first years as leader of the Soviet Union. After the creation of the Soviet state, aside from the Soviet Union republics, there were three types of units established for minority groups: the autonomous republic, the autonomous oblast, and the autonomous okrug.

Between 1919 and 1936, twenty autonomous republics were formed in the native regions of such groups as the Tatars, Mordovians and Bashkirs. The autonomous republics had a degree of political authority second only to the Union republics. This authority manifested itself primarily in the fact that the autonomous republics had independent supreme courts and

15В. И. Ленин, Сочинение (Москва: Государственное Издательство Политической Литератур, 1941) 158.

constitutions. They were considered to be a state within the Soviet Union and had jurisdiction over state plans and economy.

Autonomous oblasts, like autonomous republics, were in areas where the majority of the inhabitants were of a single non-Russian national composition or ethnic way of life. Autonomous oblasts, however, were not considered states, and consequently did not have independent laws, courts, or constitutions. They did have administrative and political authority, though; their largest responsibility was controlling the industrial enterprises within the oblast. Inside of an autonomous oblast, all business and publication had to be done in the oblast's official, non-Russian language.¹⁶

The autonomous okrugs were smaller than the autonomous oblasts, both in size and in authority. They could be created only within krais, which resembled oblasts but were on the border of the Soviet Union, or oblasts. They had no political responsibilities, but were administratively self-governing. Each autonomous okrug's rights were determined individually by the Soviet government.

It is clear that the establishment of a homeland in the USSR was not specific to the Jews. Nearly every minority group of substantial population, some of which were much smaller in number than the Jews', received some sort of autonomous region in the 1920's and 1930's. However, there was a substantial difference between the creation of a homeland for the Jews and

¹⁶"Autonomous Oblast," Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History, 1976.

those of other minorities. The area chosen for a Jewish homeland was traditionally completely absent of Jews. This fact was due in part to the fact that the Jews in the Soviet Union had no native land, though there were areas with high concentrations of Jews. The peculiarity of this choice will be discussed later. Meanwhile, the attributes and disadvantages of the area will be examined.

A History of the Birobidzhan Area

The site selected for a Jewish autonomous area, which later was named Birobidzhan, was expansive and sparsely populated. It covered 13,800 square miles, approximately the size of Belgium, and had a population in 1927 of only 30,000 people. It has repeatedly been described in Soviet propaganda and foreign accounts alike as beautiful, with its low mountains and wooded hills.¹⁷ Located among a series of waterways, the area takes its name from its two main rivers: the Bira and the Bidzhan. Much of the area is flat and swampy, and it has notoriously hot summers, cold winters, and frequent flooding.¹⁸

The land along the Amur river, around Birobidzhan, was ceded by unequal treaty to the Russian Empire from China in 1858. Originally, the

¹⁷See for example D. Bergelson, Pamphlets on Russia (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1939).

¹⁸Ralph T. Fisher, Jr., "Birobidzhan," Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History, 1976.

region was inhabited only by the native Tunguses, but the Russian government relocated a large group of Trans-Baikal Cossacks there shortly after incorporating it into the empire. Until the time that the Soviet government began considering the Birobidzhan area for Jewish settlement, a number of groups had migrated there, including Chinese and Koreans. In addition, the local population included peasants from Southern Russia and the Volga, whom the imperial government had transplanted there to work during the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway in 1910-1915.

Birobidzhan is situated close to this Trans-Siberian railway, though in the 1920's, there was no more than a flag-stop station near Birobidzhan. Approximately one hundred miles from this flag-stop station was the major Soviet city, Khabarovsk.

The Russian-Manchurian and later, Soviet-Chinese border along the Amur river had a history of conflict. Japanese armies, fighting the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war, had occupied the area from 1918 until 1922. In 1920, the Soviet state had created the Far Eastern Republic, which was intended to act as a buffer state between Japan and Soviet Russia. This republic existed only until 1922, when the Japanese armies withdrew from Siberia. Though the Japanese troops had left, tensions remained, and conflicts arose again when Japanese forces began occupying Manchuria in 1931.

The Soviet state's relations with China were also strained. Both Russia and China had at separate times controlled Manchuria, and they jointly managed the Eastern Chinese Railway. This was a topic of disagreement, as was the question of whether the new Soviet state was obligated to uphold or to annul the treaties which had been made between the Russian Empire and China. Tensions were further aggravated during the Chinese revolutionary movement of the mid 1920's.¹⁹ Soviet support of the Chinese communists conflicted with the Chinese government's interests, and after the revolutionary movement was crushed in 1927, China and the Soviet Union remained on unfriendly terms.

Meanwhile, the population of the Chinese side of the border was rapidly growing due to migration and resettlement within the country.²⁰ In contrast, the population on the Russian side had not changed since the relocation of peasants to the Amur region by the Russian imperialistic government.

In order to determine the feasibility of a large-scale settlement in the area, in 1927 the Soviet government organized the first major expedition to the area. This KOMZET expedition, led by Soviet Jew B. L. Brook, consisted of 180 Soviet scientists.²¹ The expedition led to a thorough analysis of the area's climate, conditions, and possible development; this study was presented to the government in 1928. It concluded that the region was quite inhabitable, but before mass settlement could begin, a number of preparations had to be

¹⁹George Vernadsky, A History of Russia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969) 332.

²⁰Ильин, 164.

²¹Levin, 284.

made. Paved roads were needed to replace the dirt ones which flooded yearly. Additionally, wells had to be dug and swamps drained. Also, winter housing had to be built for both settlers and farm animals.²²

The report recommended that 1928 should be devoted to the preparation of the area, and in 1929, the first 1000 colonists could arrive. After that, it was important that the area become quickly and densely populated in order for industry and agriculture to develop rapidly and efficiently. The study also suggested that initially only agricultural workers and laborers arrive in Birobidzhan, and after initial developments were made, entire families could come.²³

In 1928, the Soviet government allowed the American organization Icor to explore the area and do a second study. This study came to similar conclusions regarding the roads and water supply. It also detailed inexpensive methods of preparing buildings for the extreme and wet climate.²⁴

Though these studies were reviewed by the government, none of the recommended preparations was made, and on March 28, 1928, approval was given by the government to begin colonization of Birobidzhan "for the purpose of the dense settlement of free lands by working Jews," and eventually for the formation of a "Jewish, national, administrative-territorial entity."²⁵

²²В. Р. Вильямс, Бирско-Биджанский Район Дальневосточного Края. Труды Экспедиции 1927 г. (Москва: Эмэс, 1928) 88-89.

²³Solomon Schwartz, The Jews in the Soviet Union (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951) 175.

²⁴American Icor Commission, 79-80.

²⁵Levin, 285.

Between this date and June 1928, 654 Jews, intending to settle on the land, arrived at the Tikhonkaya station from Kazan, Minsk and Smolensk.²⁶ At the Tikhonkaya station, they found that no housing or cultivatable land had been prepared; only tents had been set up for them.

The ill-prepared region had no official name or designation until 1931, when the area around Tikhonkaya became Birobidzhan and received "worker settlement" status. By this time, more than 18,000 Jewish settlers had arrived in the Birobidzhan area, though of these, over half had left due to the treacherous conditions. These figures were far below the government's projection of 60,000 Jews settled in Birobidzhan by 1932.²⁷

Though the number of Jewish farmers in Russia was on the rise in the 1920's, the vast majority of the settlers in Birobidzhan were employed either as professionals or in service professions; they were not agricultural workers. This lack of experience and skill was blamed for the dismal results of the first years, when both animals and people starved. To rectify this, OZET and the government wanted to recruit more experienced agricultural workers, such as kolkhoz foremen,²⁸ and began heavily restricting the number of people with no farming experience allowed to relocate to Birobidzhan.

Even the settlers who did have prior farming experience faced difficulties in Birobidzhan. The climate and soil were very different from that to which the farmers had been accustomed in the Ukraine. For many, there simply was not

²⁶Levin, 286.

²⁷Ralph T. Fisher, Jr., "Birobidzhan."

²⁸Levin, 305.

enough equipment available, and consequently, no work was available.

Anthrax, a horse disease, killed off most of the horses, necessary for field work, which had been transported to Birobidzhan. In addition to these problems, the first year of settlement coincided with the worst flooding in the region in decades.²⁹

All of these difficulties were compounded by the unforeseen hostility of the local population. Though the first expedition to Birobidzhan had reported that the local population was "alarmed and apprehensive," by the prospect of large-scale settlement, Soviet publications printed that the native people welcomed it. KOMZET officials privately acknowledged that the locals were "wary," but in official reports called them "helpful and giving." First hand accounts, on the other hand, told of a resentful local population which refused the settlers access to wells and addressed them with anti-Semitic slurs.³⁰

Despite all of these setbacks, progress was made by the 1930's. Collective farms were organized and Yiddish schools established. Thousands of Jews remained in Birobidzhan, overcoming the most difficult obstacles of the first few years, and helping to build the city and a number of collective farms.

Due to the Jewish schools and Yiddish street signs, Jews became the most visible group in Birobidzhan. However, they were never in the majority. The Soviet government had initially said that when Jews became

²⁹«Биробиджан» Краткая Еврейская Энциклопедия, 1976.

³⁰Levin. 288-9.

fifty percent of the population, Birobidzhan would become a Jewish national unit. In 1935, Jews made up twenty four percent of Birobidzhan's population; this was the largest concentration of Jews in Birobidzhan at any time. In May of 1934, when Jews composed only 20% of the population, Birobidzhan, despite this low percentage of Jews, officially became the Jewish Autonomous Oblast.³¹

Though Mikhail Kalinin had originally promised that Birobidzhan would eventually become a republic, this plan was never fulfilled. On November 25, 1936, in "On the Draft Constitution of the USSR," Stalin wrote that in order for a region to become a republic, it needed a population of more than one million, and the nationality of name had to be in the majority.³² Though the population of Birobidzhan continued to increase, its non-Jewish segment grew at a rate greater than or equal to the Jewish segment. Furthermore, the Jewish Autonomous Region was not physically capable of holding a million people; consequently, there was no hope of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast ever gaining the more independent status of a republic.

By the time Birobidzhan became an autonomous oblast, the way of life of its people had stabilized. Though only 17% of the Jews lived in farming communities, a town was rapidly growing within Birobidzhan. This town, also named Birobidzhan, gained official city status in 1937 with a population of

³¹Ralph T. Fisher, "Birobidzhan."

³²Michael Stanislawsky, The Birobidzhan Affair (introduction)

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) xv.

30,000.³³

From the first settlements in 1928, Jews had been active in the local politics and culture. In 1930, they occupied five of the ten seats in the Communist Party Bureau of Birobidzhan, and by 1935 had nine of the now eleven seats.³⁴ Until Stalin's purges began in 1936, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, whose official language was Yiddish, had a Jewish theater, clubs, and newspapers.

Stalin brought an end to all this activity with his oppression of all non-Soviet "nationalistic" culture from the 1930's until his death in 1953. Most of the Jews active in the establishment and support of Birobidzhan were arrested during these years. Use of Yiddish in official business was prohibited, as were Jewish schools and publications.³⁵

Jewish culture in Birobidzhan was never really revived after this, though there were a few waves of migration in the decade after World War II. Though the Jewish Autonomous Oblast still exists in name, the statement that "there's nothing Jewish about the Jewish Autonomous Oblast" is frequently heard from educated Jews and non-Jews in the former Soviet Union.³⁶ It is reasonable to say, then, that these chapters have been a brief summary of the entire history of Birobidzhan.

For many foreign and Russian Jews alike, Birobidzhan, in retrospect, was

³³Ralph T. Fisher, "Birobidzhan."

³⁴Levin, 302.

³⁵"Birobidzhan," Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and East European History.

³⁶Interview with M. A. Meskina, Nizhnii Novgorod, January, 1993.

nothing more than a distant ghetto for the Jews-- an anti-Semitic, Soviet plan. For others, Birobidzhan is simply a puzzling but miniscule chapter in Soviet history. However small this segment of history may seem, it is indisputable that a great many people in the government, in Russia's Jewish circles, and in American Jewish communities, strongly supported the creation of a Jewish homeland inside of the USSR. In the following chapters, I will attempt to explain why each of these groups had such enthusiasm and offered such support for remote and barren Birobidzhan.

THE SUPPORT OF THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT

The motives behind the Soviet government's strong support of Birobidzhan in the 1920's and 1930's encompass all three categories mentioned in the introduction. To reiterate these, the first possible motivation is that the government had genuine sympathy for the plight of the Jews following the revolution and wanted to assist them economically. The second motivation is that the Soviets had anti-Semitic motives and wanted to relocate the Russian Jews to a remote and difficult area. The last possibility is that the government's motives were primarily political-- Birobidzhan was an area in need of settlement, and many Jews were willing to move there.

Finally, one notable reason for governmental support can be attributed to any one of these three motivations: Jewish colonization in Birobidzhan was clearly an effort by the government to replace Zionist sentiments about Palestine with support for a Jewish homeland within the USSR. For some, this might seem beneficial to the Jews, for it offered them a homeland. For others, it might seem to be only in Soviet interests, since it discouraged emigration and "counter-Soviet" sentiments. Finally, it could be classified as anti-Semitic due to the fact that it placed limitations on Jewish activities and freedoms. These arguments will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Each one of these possible motivations-- pro-Jewish, pro-Soviet and

anti-Semitic-- has a political figure or organization which exemplifies it.

Consequently, a single theory cannot be selected and proved. However, the initial motivations and the ways in which they changed over the years can be examined.

There are a number of plausible reasons as to why the government would be sympathetic towards the Jews in these years. Jews were supposed to have benefitted economically from the end of the tsarist government and the emergence of a communist government in Russia. After the revolution, hundreds of anti-Jewish discriminatory laws of tsarist Russia, including the existence of the Pale of Settlement, were abolished by this leadership, and Jews became Soviet citizens. As a result of this, Jews achieved a level of equality and freedom of movement which they had never had in the Russian Empire.

But the Jews also suffered an additional setback with the rise of Soviet power. The main occupations of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement had been business and trade, and religious occupations were still prominent in the shtetls. However, the new Soviet government opposed clergy and "petty bourgeois" (*i.e.* private tradesmen and businessmen), and immediately began ridding the country of these occupations. As a result, even the meager livelihoods which the Jews had been earning before the revolution suffered.

In order to help the Jews escape from the economic troubles brought on

by these changes, the Soviet government offered financial support and encouraged Jews to move into new occupations-- primarily farming and industry. As Peter Smidovitch, Vice-President of All the Soviet Republics and President of KOMZET explained in 1925, "The Russian government realizes the great suffering brought about through this phase of the government activity [abolishment of private enterprise] and is anxious to help adjust the present unbalanced economic condition of the Jew."³⁷

In addition to the economic strains brought on by the new leadership and laws, the Jews had suffered before and during the revolution, when the Pale had been a World War I combat zone. As a consequence of this, along with the new economic policies, many of the shtetl Jews had been left homeless with little means of survival after the revolution. The government acknowledged this, and in 1929, A. I. Rykov, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics wrote that the government wanted to help "poverty stricken Jews... by furnishing them the opportunity to engage in labor...[and by] making substantial appropriations for aid."³⁸

It is also notable that encouraging Jews to settle on the land was not the only way in which the government helped the Jews improve their economic conditions. The First Five-Year Plan, a proposal for economic improvement in the USSR, was instituted in August 1929. In it, Jews were also urged to

³⁷D. I. Brown, The New Exodus (New York, 1925) 10.

³⁸American Icor Commission, 91.

move into the Soviet Union's expanding industry.

The Soviet government, in addition to helping Jews remove themselves from poverty, offered them a way out of the social oppression they had suffered in Imperial Russia. When the government outlawed anti-Semitic discrimination, it also outlawed and enforced laws against pogroms, the pillaging and murdering of entire Jewish villages, which had been common in tsarist Russia and rampant during the civil war. These laws were strictly enforced in the first years of the Soviet state.

American David Brown, of the Executive Committee of the Joint Distribution Committee, visited Russian agricultural settlement in Southern Russia in 1925. In light of the economic and social assistance offered by the Soviet government to the Jews in the Pale, he said, "I can see no object that the government might have other than [that which] appears on the surface as a genuine interest in the solution of the particular problem of the Jew."³⁹

The most outspoken supporter of Jewish colonization within the government was Mikhail Kalinin. In a speech to OZET in 1926, Kalinin said:

Перед еврейским народом стоит большая проблема--сохранить свою национальность, а для этого нужно превратить значительную часть еврейского населения в оседлое крестьянское земледельческое компактное население, измеряемое по крайней мере сотнями тысяч. Только при таких условиях еврейская масса может надеяться на дальнейшее существование своей национальности.⁴⁰

[The Jewish people now faces the great task of preserving

³⁹Brown, 31.

⁴⁰Правда. 26 Nov. 1926.

its nationality. For this purpose a large segment of the Jewish population must transform itself into a compact farming population, numbering at least several hundred thousand souls.]

Kalinin's ideas about Jewish national identity were not embraced by some in the government, including Stalin, who opposed the idea that Jews were even a nation. In 1913, he wrote that the Jewish people could not be considered a nation because those "who consider themselves Jews live in different parts of the globe, never seeing one another, never acting jointly either in peacetime or in war."⁴¹ When the idea of a Jewish autonomous area was first approached in 1924, it was discussed solely as a solution to the Jews' economic ills and "undecidedly noted" was the "national meaning."⁴²

However, by the time that Birobidzhan was chosen, many political figures viewed the establishment of a Jewish autonomous area as a viable alternative to Zionism, which the Soviet government opposed. As Evseksiia leader Alexander Chemerisky confidently announced, "The autonomous territory will be the heaviest blow to Zionist and religious ideology."⁴³ Many Western historical accounts also credit the desire to eradicate Zionism from the Soviet Union as one of the main motivations for creating a Jewish autonomous area. Among historians who follow this school is Ben Ami, who wrote that an autonomous territory was planned "to improve the Jewish

⁴¹Arkady Vaksberg, Stalin against the Jews (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) 4.

⁴²Ильин, 161.

⁴³Levin, 291.

social status and to create an alternative to Zionism."⁴⁴

Some Soviet groups were less overt in their efforts to replace Zionism with an allegiance to an inner-Soviet Jewish territory. Evseksiia, a fundamentally anti-Zionist organization, appealed to the desire for a Jewish homeland with its Yiddish slogan, "Tsu a Yidish Land" ["To a Jewish Land"].⁴⁵ This phrase, ironically, was one which had been used for years by Zionists encouraging settlement in Palestine.

Other indications that the Soviet government was appealing to Jewish hopes for a homeland included the statement by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, on August 29, 1936: "For the first time in the history of the Jewish people its burning desire for the creation of a homeland of its own, for the achievement of its own national statehood, has found fulfillment."⁴⁶

Statements such as these, published in American Jewish newspapers, lead to the speculation that perhaps the Soviet government saw the establishment of a Jewish homeland as a way «повлиять на евреев и мнение на западе» ["to influence Jews and public opinion in the West."]⁴⁷ The United States did not recognize the Communist Government in Russia until 1933, and the Soviet Union was in need of foreign allegiance and financial

⁴⁴Ben Ami, Between Hammer and Sickle (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967) 233.

⁴⁵Levin, 291.

⁴⁶Schwartz, 181.

⁴⁷«Биробиджан» Краткая Еврейская Энциклопедия.

support. Furthermore, many American and Western European Jews were wary of any government in power in Russia, due to the history of government-encouraged anti-Semitism within its borders. The show of sympathy towards the Jews by the Soviet Union, as will be discussed later, did have a positive influence on Jews in America. The creation of a Jewish homeland was another way for the Soviet government to prove its commitment to improving Jewish conditions within its state.

It is obvious, though, that Birobidzhan was not the most logical place for the establishment of a Jewish homeland, since no Jews had lived in the area prior to 1928. A number of highly concentrated Jewish communities existed in the Ukraine and Crimea, but not in the Far East. Consequently, it is necessary to examine the motives for the selection of Birobidzhan as the future Jewish autonomous territory.

According to Semen Dimanshtain, Commissar of Jewish Affairs, the Birobidzhan location was first proposed by the commissars of agriculture and defense, not by one of the Jewish groups. This indicates that the reasons for selection of the Birobidzhan site were oriented towards defense and agriculture. Indeed, the Far East, and especially the Amur region, were important and underdeveloped in the spheres of defense and agriculture.

In terms of defense, the Soviet-Chinese border was a volatile area. The disputes between Russia and China regarding this border began in the 17th century, when the Russians entered the Amur River Valley in hopes of gaining

trading rights and, most likely, land. The conflict that this prompted was temporarily subdued by the Nerchinsk treaty of 1689, in which the Russians and the Chinese compromised on the issues of land and trade. According to the treaty, the Amur Valley, including the Birobidzhan area, was under Chinese authority.

Russian expansion rekindled the debate over the area in the mid 19th century. Along with the land, Russia demanded access to all Chinese seaports and open trade inside China for Russians. Because of military defeats and difficulties of its own, China was forced to meet the Russian demands. In the 1850's and 1860's, a number of unequal treaties were signed between Russia and China: the treaties of Aigun, Tientsin, Peking and Tarbagatas.

When the Soviets came to power, they condemned all imperialistic acts of the tsarist government. These acts included the relations Russia had with China. In 1918, the Soviet government made clear, "We renounce the conquests of the tsarist government in China and we restore the sovereign rights of China in this territory."⁴⁸

This announcement was followed with a few gestures, such as removing Russian military presence from Mongolia, but the land acquired by Russia through the unequal treaties of the 19th century was never returned to China. In fact, steps were taken to prevent China from expanding into the territory that was once theirs. By the time that the Soviet Union was created, the

⁴⁸Clifford M. Foust, "Soviet-Chinese Relations," The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History, 1976.

Chinese side of this border had grown dramatically, while the population of the Soviet side of the Amur river had remained constant.

Victor Fink, a Soviet writer who accompanied Icor on its expedition, stressed the importance of "assimilating by the Soviet state the vast spaces of the Far East, the continuing emptiness of which whets the appetite of our imperialist neighbors."⁴⁹

These "empty spaces" were an even larger concern for KOMZET deputy chairman Abram Merezhin, who forecasted that

In about 10 to fifteen years a dense mass of Chinese will have moved close to the Amur and Sungari rivers. The Manchurian population will then have reached about 30 million. Hence the question is whether it will be possible to people the Amur area of Birobidzhan within the coming 10 to fifteen years. If it is peopled in time, the immigration of Chinese agriculturalists will have been made impossible.⁵⁰

Besides the Soviet fears of Chinese expansion, there were also suspicions of the Japanese. Yuri Larin, an activist in the Jewish settlement movement of the 1920's and 1930's, reported that "the factors that inevitably lure Japanese imperialism to the Far East" could only be stopped by Soviet colonization of the area.⁵¹ These political considerations prompt Soviet historian Arkady Vaksberg to assert that "the Jewish settlers were expected to play the homeland's guards... The Jewish settlers could be a good buffer."⁵²

But, while Vaksberg implies that this purpose was not known to the

⁴⁹Schwartz, 173.

⁵⁰Schwartz, 175.

⁵¹Schwartz, 175.

⁵²Vaksberg, 65.

Jews, it is apparent from the abovementioned statements by Soviet Jews that the political reasons for selecting Birobidzhan as the site for Jewish settlement were not kept secret. In fact, they were brought up with some frequency during a time when patriotic and work-related motives prompted many Soviet citizens to relocate to the Far East.

The Far East contained valuable natural resources which remained undiscovered or unused in the first decades of the twentieth century. The First Five-Year plan called for the exploitation of these resources. Birobidzhan in particular had an abundance of minerals and rock deposits, including marble and limestone, and this provided a further reason for developing the area.

The area did develop quickly, though at the expense of opportunity for many of the Jews who sought work and housing. By 1932, the recruits sought were established farmers, industrial workers and productive artisans.⁵³ These were not generally the Jews who were in need of assistance. By 1936, OZET released a resolution stating that there was "no longer a question of how to take care of the needs of this or that migrant, but of how to meet the skilled labor requirement" of the area.⁵⁴ This came at a time when Jews were still by no means comfortably settled on the land in Birobidzhan, and still were in need of government assistance. These events took place later, however, as attitudes towards the Jewish Autonomous Oblast changed. This change of attitude by the

⁵³Israel Emiot, The Birobidzhan Affair (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) 12.

⁵⁴Schwarz, 180.

government as a whole is better discussed in the context of anti-Semitism.

It is important to separate the Soviet Union's initial intentions in choosing and developing Birobidzhan from its later motives. In the 1920's, the plan to create a Jewish autonomous territory was based on the Jews' impoverished conditions, combined with an effort to gain Jewish support. The selection of Birobidzhan as the location was a result of its political significance and its natural resources.

Later, beginning in the mid-1930's, anti-Semitism was on the rise in the Soviet Union. At this time, Jewish cultural activity became illegal, and many were arrested in Birobidzhan because, as writer Israel Emiot, a Jewish resident of Birobidzhan understood and reported, "it [Jewish culture] is artificial. [It is] trying to implant Jewish culture in a region where... most aren't Jewish."⁵⁵ These sentiments, widespread in the government and encouraged by Stalin during the second half of his reign, were not found in the 1920's when many in the new government were Jewish. In order to deal with this change in attitudes, I will concentrate on the motives for selecting and establishing Birobidzhan as an autonomous Jewish area in the 1920's and early 1930's, for after this, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast and its residents were alternately ignored and subjected to persecution and mass arrests.

There is little doubt that the Birobidzhan location was selected for its strategic political and developmental possibilities, not for its history of Jewish culture. There is also no question that few preparations were made for

⁵⁵Emiot, 12.

settlement and that migration began at a rate much faster than was recommended. Finally, it is true that the Soviet government opposed Zionism. However, none of these facts proves that the motives in the early years for settling Jews were anti-Semitic.

It has been established that Birobidzhan was an area politically in need of an increased population, and that this was a contributing factor in its selection for settlement. But this alone does not show that reasons for creating Birobidzhan as a Jewish autonomous territory conflicted with Jewish interests. Outspoken Jewish leaders Larin, Merezhin and Fink all recognized the political motives, but nonetheless expressed a desire to encourage Jews to immigrate to the area. There was no indication that political interests of the government and the personal interests of the Jews involved with Birobidzhan could not coexist, and, indeed, could not work together.

There is evidence of neglect, however, in that the government did little to prepare the Birobidzhan area for settlement; it has been subsequently argued by many historians that this lack of preparation and financial support was a result of anti-Semitism. After all, both KOMZET and Icor had reported that "at the present time colonization is not practicable without adequate facilities."⁵⁶ But the government nevertheless began colonization immediately, without any of these preparations. As a result, when the Jewish settlers arrived, there was no housing, and they had to use primarily their own funds and labor

⁵⁶American Icor Commission, 88-9.

to build homes and establish farms.⁵⁷ The Jews, without assistance, were expected to develop the area themselves; as Rykov said, "The question of the formation of an autonomous territory in Birobidzhan... depends entirely on the success of the settlement of this territory by Jews."⁵⁸

Many historians, including Schwarz, expressed the view that the absence of support was due to a lack of concern for the well-being of the Jews. Schwarz, implying that the government had negative, ulterior motives, wrote that "the haste with which everything was done showed that more than a concern for the plight of the Jewish masses... was involved."⁵⁹

There is another explanation, however, for the absence of preparation and financial support given to the Jews in Birobidzhan. The Soviet Union had great economic difficulties, stemming from the wars, the low level of industrial development, and the difficulty of obtaining foreign loans. Rykov wrote to Icor that "it is... necessary to bear in mind that the government of the USSR is at this time deprived of the opportunity to appropriate new additional means for this purpose [of assisting Birobidzhan's development]."⁶⁰

Kalinin acknowledged the need for money, particularly foreign, in an article written in 1926 about the effort to settle Jews in agriculture in the Crimea:

Чтобы их посадить [на землю] на каждую десятину
надо вложить минимум пару сотен рублей; ни у

⁵⁷American Icor Commission, 75.

⁵⁸American Icor Commission, 92.

⁵⁹Schwarz, 175.

⁶⁰American Icor Commission, 91.

советского правительства, ни у населения этой суммы нет. Эта сумма может быть собрана только за границей.⁶¹

[In order to settle the Jews (on the land), it is necessary to deposit a minimum of a couple hundred rubles for every dessiatina⁶² of land. Neither the Soviet government nor the Soviet population has this amount. This amount can only be collected from outside the country.]

This need was still pertinent and probably greater when Birobidzhan, rather than the Crimea, was chosen as the site for agricultural settlement. It is undisputable that the Soviet government was struggling economically during this period, and this offers a legitimate excuse as to why preparations were incomplete.

Another reason that the government's motives regarding the creation of Birobidzhan are usually suspected to be anti-Semitic is that later, in the 1940's, it became clear that Stalin was an anti-Semite. Since Stalin was head of the Soviet Union when the Birobidzhan location was selected, it easily follows that his motives in choosing such a location were not in the best interests of the Jews. This speculation leads to the assumption that the Birobidzhan plan as a whole was anti-Semitic.

An examination of Stalin's attitudes towards the Jews is necessary in order to analyze his role in Birobidzhan. Beginning before the 1917 revolutions, Stalin publicly expounded the Bolshevik party line, which adamantly opposed anti-Semitism. It wasn't until the 1940's that Stalin's

⁶¹Шварц, 163.

⁶²*dessiatina*= 2.7 acres

anti-Semitic sentiments became apparent (though not to everyone), and some have theorized that his anti-Semitism itself did not form until the 1940's.

This is disputed by a number of things, the strongest of which is testimony by his former secretary, Boris Bazhanov. In Bazhanov's memoirs, he recounts tales of Stalin's private anti-Jewish statements and jokes throughout his rule.⁶³

In fact, according to Vaksberg, during the civil war, Stalin was suspected by communist party bosses of harboring anti-Semitic ideas, due to his hatred of Leon Trotsky and many other Jewish political figures. However, Stalin dispelled this theory, at least temporarily, by surrounding himself by Jewish secretaries at all times and by making his vocal opposition to anti-Semitism heard publicly.

Though this cover-up may have worked for a while, with hindsight there is no doubt about Stalin's anti-Semitism. So the question remains, What role did Stalin and his anti-Semitism play in the selection of Birobidzhan as a future Jewish homeland?

It appears that Stalin's role initially was not a major one. He was against the creation of a Jewish homeland, since he did not view the Jews as a "nation" at all. In addition, the establishment of an agricultural homeland further contradicted his views, as he wrote in 1913 regarding Jews and agriculture, "Jews have no stable stratum connected to the soil that naturally unites a nation not only as its framework but as its 'national' market."⁶⁴

However, Stalin did support the choice of Birobidzhan as a location, and from this fact, we can draw two conclusions. First, Stalin's role in the

⁶³See Vaksberg, ch 2, 5.

⁶⁴Vaksberg, 5.

government, though he was head of the state at that time, was not yet absolute; his reign of terror had not begun, and other politicians still had a say in the government. Thus whether or not to establish a Jewish homeland was not Stalin's decision, and he could voice his support or dissent only for a given location. Naturally, he would rather have conceded a distant, remote area to the Jews than the fertile land of Southern Russia.

The second conclusion which can be drawn is that Stalin, still adhering to Bolshevik party line, needed to prove his objection to anti-Semitism. Bazhanov's recollections of Stalin's many attempts, through words and actions, to demonstrate his good feelings towards Jews support this.

Later in Stalin's rule, Birobidzhan came completely under his power and authority. At this time, the anti-Semitism of Stalin became clear through mass arrests and restrictions. Some historians, such as Ben Ami, assert that "there is no doubt that Stalin and his cohorts had decided that the whole plan of settling Jews on the Chinese border in an autonomous Jewish region was basically wrong and should not be allowed to develop."⁶⁵ This opinion stems from the fact that Stalin wanted the Jews to have no power in the USSR.

Others see Stalin's obviously negative intentions. As Vaksberg somewhat sarcastically writes:

He [Stalin] needed a Jewish 'territory,' not for the sake of the people he loved so much but because he could then collect them all in one place, and enjoy the 'moral right' to clean out the cities and regions that in his opinion were too densely populated with

⁶⁵Ben Ami, 238.

Jews. He camouflaged this reason with others.⁶⁶

However, Stalin's role in the selection of Birobidzhan was minor; he did no more than voice his support for the Birobidzhan location over the Crimea. Therefore it cannot be concluded that the plan was anti-Semitic, even if Stalin himself was.

The only remaining argument regarding the theory that the Soviet Union's intentions were anti-Semitic is that the government and the Birobidzhan plan were anti-Zionist. While the concept of a Jewish autonomous area may have been intended in part to quell Zionist ideas, only ten percent of Soviet Jews were Zionists.⁶⁷ Therefore, in all likelihood the Birobidzhan plan was not created with the main goal of stifling Zionism. Birobidzhan would have been a major undertaking for a small and futile goal.

Furthermore, even if this had been the aim, it would not necessarily have indicated that the Soviet government was against the Jews. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are not synonymous, just as Judaism and Zionism are not one and the same thing. It is true that the Soviet government in the 1920's opposed Zionism, but so did many Jews, including the large American organization JDC. Thus objection to Zionism is by no means equivalent to intolerance towards Jews.

Anti-Semitism seems to be the least likely motive in the government's decision to establish Birobidzhan as a Jewish territory. While it is clear that the Soviet government did not institute the Birobidzhan plan efficiently or carefully,

⁶⁶Vaksberg, 64.

⁶⁷Ralph T. Fisher, Jr., "Birobidzhan."

it cannot be concluded by the information available that the creation of Birobidzhan was anti-Semitic. Again it is crucial to emphasize the difference between initial motives in creating Birobidzhan and later attitudes towards the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, which were unquestionably anti-Semitic. Although ideas within the government concerning Birobidzhan changed in the following decades, it can be seen that political factors and post-revolutionary attempts to improve conditions were initially the main motives in Birobidzhan's establishment. Desire to improve relations with the West and to discourage Zionism within the country were more minor reasons which were also factors in the government's support of Birobidzhan. Only in later years did anti-Semitism become a major factor in the development of Birobidzhan.

THE SUPPORT OF THE SOVIET JEWS

Soviet Jews adopted two of the main motives of the government as reasons for their support of and enthusiasm towards Birobidzhan: political motivations and the desire to improve Jewish conditions. In some ways, these Jewish motives mirrored the Soviet government's. The economic and social need to find an alternative to the Pale of Settlement was the same, and many saw a Jewish homeland as the solution. The desire to settle the Far East was also not exclusive to the government; many patriotic Soviets, among them Jews, willingly ventured east for this purpose. However, some might see the Jews' strong desire for a cultural homeland as differing from the Soviet government's reasons for establishing a Jewish homeland.

Among the prominent Jewish groups in the Soviet Union, there was not a lot of encouragement regarding immigration to Birobidzhan. Jews of the Bund and the intelligentsia were divided on the issue of a Jewish homeland within the Soviet Union, and Zionists were adamantly opposed to it.⁶⁸ But Jews nonetheless moved to Birobidzhan. Obviously all of the Jews who voluntarily immigrated to Birobidzhan are testament to the fact that there was popular support for the plan. Additionally, the American Icor commission reports finding "much interest towards Birobidzhan" on the part of the Jews in the Pale.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Lionel Kochan, The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917 (New York: Oxford Press, 1978) 67ff.

⁶⁹American Icor Commission, 10.

For the Jews in the USSR, the most pressing issue after the civil war was the need to alleviate the devastating economic problems in the Pale of Settlement. After the civil war, 700,000 Jews were left homeless and 300,000 were orphaned in Southern Russia.⁷⁰ As has been mentioned, Jewish businesses were requisitioned by the Soviet government. It was for these reasons that the government sought to establish a Jewish agricultural territory. This, in conjunction with the fact that most Jews in the Pale in the mid 1920's thought that "colonization was the only solution to the situation in which the Jew finds himself,"⁷¹ was also a natural reason for Jews from the Pale to support Birobidzhan. Some of them saw the potential opportunities in Birobidzhan, and in fact the majority of the Jews who went to Birobidzhan between 1928 and 1933 were from the most impoverished areas of the Ukraine.⁷²

While an effort to escape poverty may seem to be the most obvious reason for Jewish colonization of Birobidzhan, idealism also played a significant role. Many of the immigrants to the area were the children of illiterate peasants. These youth had been given an opportunity under Soviet rule to attend grammar school and then the Jewish Agricultural Institute outside of Minsk. Obtaining a higher education had been unthought of for a peasant Jew in Pre-Soviet times. For this reason, a number of young Soviet Jews were enthusiastic and eager to help build up undeveloped areas of the Soviet Union.

⁷⁰Kochan, 66.

⁷¹Brown, 9.

⁷²Kochan, 75.

Many such Jews, given opportunities previously unavailable to them, pledged allegiance to the new Soviet state. The Soviet writer Der Nister, describing a train-car of colonists, wrote of this patriotism: "There are those whose intentions are... of a national character... and there are also burning enthusiasts, ready to give up everything in order to live there."⁷³

This passionate patriotism was also reported in the Periodical Tribune, an organ of OZET:

The masses of the Jewish toilers, who are permeated with loyalty and devotion to the Soviet regime, are going to Birobidzhan... They are not only fighting for their country, not for a new fatherland, as the USSR is already for them, but for strengthening the Soviet Union and the Far East.⁷⁴

This nationalism towards the Soviet Union was fueled by the strong and vocal support of a few Soviet politicians, in particular Lazar Kaganovich and Kalinin. Kaganovich, himself a Jew and a member of Politburo, visited Birobidzhan in 1936. As a display of Kaganovich's popularity, or to create the illusion the Kaganovich held great popularity in Birobidzhan, the Birobidzhan state theater was named after him. Kalinin, in addition to the contributions he made which were noted earlier, lent, in the words of Soviet historian Nora Levin, "prestige" to the Birobidzhan plan.⁷⁵ A non-Jew, Kalinin helped spread the idea that all the Soviet Union and all the government, not just the Jews, were interested in Birobidzhan. These politicians' visits were

⁷³Jacob Lvavi and Shimon Redlich, "Birobidzhan."

⁷⁴Kochan, 71.

⁷⁵Levin, 282.

encouraging because they confirmed continued Soviet support for Birobidzhan.

Soviet Jewish writers also played a part in Birobidzhan. Encouraged to move to the area in the 1930's, writers living in Birobidzhan included Israel Emiot, Buzi Miler, Aaron Vergelis and Lyuba Wassermann. All were members of the Soviet Writers' Association of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. Only the works of Emiot are currently in print, but all were known to be loyal to Birobidzhan and the Soviet Union in the 1930's, and all wrote about Birobidzhan. An example of this patriotism and enthusiasm is found in Emiot's description of his introduction to Birobidzhan. In his memoirs, he writes, "I was encouraged to read... the speech that Kalinin had delivered in 1926... I did and was moved by its sympathy for the Jewish plight."⁷⁶ The moral support of writers and politicians alike undoubtedly encouraged the residents of Birobidzhan. Their tiny corner of the Soviet Union was receiving frequent national attention.

While many politicians were sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, whether the Soviet government wanted to establish a homeland for cultural reasons is debatable. On the one hand, the battle against Jewish cultural activity had begun with Evseksiia proceeding the revolution. The concept of a Jewish cultural homeland completely contradicts this stand. On the other hand, Kalinin and others endorsed the plan for a homeland precisely for cultural reasons. In fact, Lenin too spoke of the need to maintain cultural autonomy. Since Evseksiia opposed the Birobidzhan plan, it is possible that its members

⁷⁶Emiot, xi.

saw the establishment of Birobidzhan as a governmental attempt to create a Jewish cultural center. In any case, there are indications, such as Kalinin's speeches or the existence of Yiddish schools and publishing houses, that the government was allowing the Jews to have a cultural homeland.

Regardless of the government's attitudes towards a Jewish cultural homeland, it is clear that a lot of the Jews in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast were attracted to the idea of having access to a culturally Jewish area. As Emiot explained, despite all the problems of the area, "a Jew could feel at home in Birobidzhan."⁷⁷

As a homeland, Birobidzhan can be considered a failure, for Jewish activity and culture did not survive Stalin's purges and the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state. However, in the 1920's and 1930's, Birobidzhan was considered a Jewish homeland by many of its residents, including Emiot. Some saw it as the only hope for the continuation of Soviet Jewry. For example, Der Nister believed that Jewish culture would survive only if Jews lived in compact masses.⁷⁸ Others ideologically saw it as a way for the Jews to help the growing Soviet Union. Finally, there were those who sought economic salvation in Birobidzhan, and perhaps with this saw a chance to replace the Jewish communities of Southern Russia which had been lost in the revolutions and the wars.

⁷⁷Emiot, 9.

⁷⁸Emiot, 10.

FOREIGN SUPPORT

Jews and a handful of non-Jews in America and Europe, like the Jews in the Soviet Union, supported Birobidzhan with the hope that it would offer cultural and economic stability to the displaced Jews of the Soviet Union and, the foreign Jews added, Eastern Europe. Their support, as stated before, was expressed primarily monetarily. They sent necessary supplies, including food, clothing, factory equipment, motors, and even pre-fabricated houses. By contributing material and aid to Birobidzhan, Icor, Agrojoint and Ambijan hoped to support a Jewish homeland which would offer both economic stability and cultural autonomy.

While the foreign organizations' reasons for supporting Birobidzhan were tightly focussed on benefitting the Jews economically and socially, it is impossible that other issues did not surface. The ways in which the foreign organizations dealt with questions about the location of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, the political situation of the area and the low turnout of Jews will be discussed later in this chapter. These topics were settled mainly by Soviet and Western reassurances in the form of propaganda. Some doubts were overcome by Americans and Europeans with faith and confidence in the good intentions of the Soviet government.

Icor was the first foreign group to assist in Birobidzhan. It worked with the Soviet government to determine what supplies and preparations were

necessary for the building of Birobidzhan, and did not work directly with the settlers. Icor did not include the general public in the United States where it was based, nor did it appeal to Jewish organizations in the west for help. Agrojoint's activities, rarely mentioned, were similar. Though Icor existed until 1938, the only work it did which is mentioned in publications about the Jewish Autonomous Oblast is its initial contributions, which were discussed in Chapter One. By the mid 1930's, neither Icor nor Agrojoint was visibly active in Birobidzhan.

Ambijan replaced the support of these two organizations after its formation in New York in 1934. Ambijan supported Birobidzhan before, during, and after World War II. It is important to note that its motivations for supporting Birobidzhan barely changed during these years. Even before the World War, Ambijan hoped not only to assist Soviet Jews, but also to help move displaced and struggling Jews in Eastern Europe's shadow of fascism to Birobidzhan. After the war, this goal remained. Ambijan was the only organization involved in enlisting the support of large groups of foreign Jews. Ambijan's initial statement of purpose was "to explore the question of Birobidzhan."⁷⁹ Later, Ambijan identified itself in publications as "a national organization engaged in extending material and moral aid in the building of the Jewish Autonomous Republic in Birobidzhan."⁸⁰

⁷⁹Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews (New York: Ambijan, 1936) 14.

⁸⁰Henry Frankel, The Jews in the Soviet Union and Birobidzhan (New York: Ambijan, 1947) 13.

This material support came not only in the form of monetary aid, though the money sent to Birobidzhan was substantial. In principle, foreign supporters of Birobidzhan wanted to help Jews become self-supporting. The Soviet government's treatment of the Jews encouraged many outside of the Soviet Union, who saw the actions of the Soviet government as a catalyst to the achievement of economic stability for the Jews. As Ambijan member Charles Recht wrote in 1936,

The founders of the Soviet Republic, taking account of the profound changes in the economic processes which had occurred, took steps... to affect [the Jews'] reeducation along occupational lines and their absorption into the productive life of the new Russia.⁸¹

The decision to create a Jewish autonomous territory was seen by foreign Jews as an additional way for Soviet Jews to establish themselves by finding work and becoming "productive."

Another Ambijan supporter in the United States, justice of the New York supreme court Mitchell May, said that Jews "want a chance to become self-supporting and self-respecting citizens. This can be accomplished only by means of constructive relief-- the sort which Palestine and Birobidzhan offer."⁸² Both of these opinions give very clear motivations for American support of Birobidzhan's development.

The comparison of Birobidzhan to Palestine was frequently made. For Jews around the world who wanted a Jewish territory, Birobidzhan was much

⁸¹Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 13.

⁸²Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 34.

more tangible than Palestine, which did not become the Jewish nation of Israel until 1948. Henry Frankel wrote of Birobidzhan as "the growth of a Jewish state,"⁸³ and others elaborated on this hope. The Ambijan bulletin printed that "the Jews of the Soviet Union are now accorded all reasonable facilities to preserve, create and develop their national existence in Birobidzhan."⁸⁴

Most Jews in America in the 1930's were first, second or third generation Americans, and the vast majority descended from immigrants from Eastern Europe. This meant that many had heard first-hand accounts of the difficulties the Jews faced in Eastern Europe, including in Russia. The Soviet government had thus far dramatically lessened or eradicated persecution of Jews within its borders, and this was well known in American Jewish circles. However, it was equally well known that the Soviet government and the wars had also eliminated many of the Jewish communities in the Pale. American Jews feared that the loss of concentrated Jewish communities would lead to the end of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. Birobidzhan was seen as a means to stop this trend. In a 1936 Ambijan publication, the editorial board wrote, "Let us be glad that an opportunity is given to [the Jew] in the Soviet Union to continue existing as a homogeneity, which is the only physical requisite for bring forth a people's culture."⁸⁵

Some who supported the creation of a Jewish territory in Russia did not necessarily emphasize the need for a Jewish cultural center, but rather for a humanitarian refuge. According to some, this was the primary reason for

⁸³Frankel, 209.

⁸⁴Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 4.

⁸⁵Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 37.

foreign support of Birobidzhan. As Fannie Bakst, secretary of Ambijan from 1946 until 1950 and member since 1936, said in a recent interview, "My own orientation was that of many persons at that time: a united front for human values; religions or political platforms were not the core question."⁸⁶

In part, the humanitarian refuge was accomplished simply by the creation of an autonomous region for the Jews, as the other minorities already possessed. As Frankel wrote, "the Birobidzhan settlement was established to give Jews in the USSR a form of equality which they did not previously have, and that is state equality as a nation with other peoples of the USSR."⁸⁷

Along with the desire to see full equality granted to the Soviet Jews, an addition goal of Ambijan was to convince the Soviet government to allow non-Soviet Jews to populate the new Jewish state of Birobidzhan. By 1936, it was clear that anti-Semitic fascism was spreading across Europe, and Jews in Eastern Europe were in imminent danger. Though the extermination plans of the Nazis were not yet known, Jews were living in oppressed poverty, and American Jews hoped to help some by transferring them to Birobidzhan.

On October 10, 1935, OZET chairman S. Dimanshtain, representing the Soviet government, agreed to allow non-Soviet Jews to immigrate to Birobidzhan. In 1936, 1000 Jewish families from Poland and Lithuania were to receive Soviet citizenship and to move to Birobidzhan. To help fund this,

⁸⁶Interview with Fannie Bakst, New York, March, 1994.

⁸⁷Frankel, 12.

Ambijan was to pay KOMZET \$200 per family. This plan was not completed according to schedule, for in 1936, Dimanshtain wrote to Ambijan, informing them that due to a housing shortage, immigration could not begin until 1937.⁸⁸ By 1938, the Eastern Europeans had not yet received passage to the Soviet Union, and in this year OZET was abolished by the Soviet government and news about Birobidzhan ceased. Thus it is unlikely that the plan was ever fulfilled.

However, in 1936, nobody in the United states had any way of foretelling this, and the plan to move Polish and Lithuanian Jews to Birobidzhan was enthusiastically received. The division head of Ambijan, Aaron Lipper, wrote that "thousands of Polish, Rumanian, and other European Jews are clamoring for settlement in Birobidzhan. To them it spells 'HOPE' and a 'PROMISED LAND'."⁸⁹ Ambijan member Ruth Anshen seconded this faith in Birobidzhan's promise when she said, "Among the possible havens of refuge Birobidzhan stands out like a beacon of promise on the otherwise gray and mournful horizon."⁹⁰

The promise of a Jewish homeland, as a cultural center, a safe haven, or an economic prospect, was the singular motivation for the support of Birobidzhan by foreign Jews. The issues which seem obviously troublesome and detrimental to the Jewish settlers now-- the remoteness of Birobidzhan and its political viability-- were barely addressed. However, when they were discussed, they were done so lightly and often imbedded in propaganda.

Regarding the remoteness of Birobidzhan, Icor and Ambijan offered the same explanation: the isolation of the area could only be beneficial to the

⁸⁸See Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 14-18.

⁸⁹Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 20.

⁹⁰Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 11.

settlers since the land had no history of trouble. Ambijan credited the Jewish settlers with wanting a remote area: they "desire to establish a Jewish state on soil unencumbered with old hostilities, so that they may find the fullest self-development within a socialist society."⁹¹

More attention was given to the political tension of the Birobidzhan area, and the role that its border location played in its selection. A number of reasons were given about why Jewish settlement on the Soviet-Manchurian border should not be a concern. The most common was that the area really was not as volatile as it was thought to be. Both Lord Dudley Marley, a British philanthropist involved in Birobidzhan, and Ambijan wrote of this. Marley wrote in 1930 that, while "the objection is sometimes raised that the colonization of Birobidzhan is encouraged by the Soviet Union as a barrier to the possibility of a Japanese advance into Siberia," the Amur river is a sufficient obstacle to prevent any invasion.⁹² Ambijan even compared Birobidzhan to Switzerland because both are "far enough away from any possible conflict... and in freedom to develop their own type of life."⁹³

There were two other techniques used to justify Birobidzhan's seemingly hazardous location. The first was to compare it to the other place where large groups of Jews lived, the Pale, and point out this latter area's history of serious conflict. The second, quite different from the previous two,

⁹¹Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 13.

⁹²Lord Marley, Biro-Bijan, An Eyewitness Account (London: Friends of the Soviet Union, 1930) 19.

⁹³Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 8.

involved crediting the settlers with patriotism because of their development of a "previously" vulnerable area. This latter explanation was used mostly after World War II. Frankel, for instance, wrote that "the strategic position of Birobidzhan, situated on the Russian- Japanese demarcation line, gave it special significance when the war broke out."⁹⁴

The final issue, not frequently addressed, was that of Birobidzhan's role in Zionism. The Soviet government's opposition of Zionism is never referred to; there are two likely reasons for this. First, for those who equated Zionism with Judaism, there was no evidence that the Soviet government was anti-Jewish, and therefore nobody suspected that it could oppose Zionism either. Second, the government's attitude towards Zionism was simply not an issue, since Birobidzhan had little or no effect on Jewish settlement in Palestine. Furthermore, many felt that the establishment of Birobidzhan would complement Jewish statehood, since, according to the Jewish Distribution Committee, Palestine "could not absorb the great masses of Russian Jews."⁹⁵ Samuel Dickstein, a state representative from New York in 1936, referred to Birobidzhan as "an addition to the National Homeland of Palestine."⁹⁶ Thus there were no fears that Birobidzhan would detract from Palestine.

It is clear that doubts rarely surfaced publicly in the American circles which supported Birobidzhan, and all potential glitches were handled without much depth. Ambijan and Icor can hardly be blamed for their

⁹⁴Frankel, 12.

⁹⁵Norman, 139.

⁹⁶Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 34.

superficial treatments of difficulties surrounding Birobidzhan. The amount and content of information released by the Soviet government was strictly limited, and the Soviet Union offered far more hope for the Jews than did any of its western neighbors. This also explains why the foreign attitudes towards and support of Birobidzhan hardly changed from Birobidzhan's creation in 1928 through the 1950's: the information leaving the Soviet Union remained the same - positive and promising.

This propaganda was received by heads of groups such as Ambijan and then reiterated to the Jewish public in the United States and Europe. The propaganda was accepted in part because Americans and Europeans wanted to believe that the Jews in Eastern Europe had a place of refuge. The belief that the Soviet Union sought to help the Jews was strong, and confirmed by Soviet publications which spoke of the new freedoms achieved by the "Jewish people, the most oppressed and persecuted in the Russia of the Tsars."⁹⁷ The other part of Westerners' acceptance of Soviet propaganda on Birobidzhan was that it was furthered by non-Soviet reports of the region and by respected leaders' support of Birobidzhan.

Lord Marley wrote one of the non-Soviet exaltation of Birobidzhan. In 1933, he published Biro-Bidjan: An Eye-witness Account of the New Home for the Jews in England. In the book, he describes the workers in Birobidzhan as "happy, content... all pro-Soviet,"⁹⁸ and reports that the conditions in Birobidzhan are "excellent." In the 1936 Birobidzhan Yearbook, he paints a picture of

⁹⁷D. Bergelson 9.

⁹⁸Marley, 19.

Birobidzhan as a "beautiful, healthy, abundant land."⁹⁹ Regardless of one's sentiments towards Birobidzhan, the fact that the settlers were struggling and the land not always workable cannot be denied. Thus Marley, from Soviet pressure, sympathies towards the USSR or plain ignorance, perpetrated the myth of Birobidzhan's idyllic existence. Fannie Bakst also recalls speakers at Ambijan meetings in the 1940's describing the "happy and satisfied" state of the Jewish settlers in Birobidzhan.¹⁰⁰

These positive descriptions of Birobidzhan were accepted as fact, and enthusiasm for the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was furthered by the vocal support of world leaders such as Albert Einstein. In 1935, Einstein said,

I feel impelled to recognize thankfully that Birobidzhan is of great significance for a part of the Jewish people and I appreciate that the furthering of this colony by the Russian government is a generous help to them.¹⁰¹

Einstein's support lasted until at least 1946, at which time he asked 2000 wealthy Jewish businessmen to send relief supplies to Birobidzhan.

In addition to Einstein, political leaders such as Mitchell May and Samuel Dickstein, who were mentioned previously, and Senator Warren G. Magnuson of Washington lent their support to Birobidzhan and encouraged others to do so as well. The Hollywood actress Lena Horne hosted an Ambijan fundraiser in her home in 1946. Naturally, all of this enthusiasm for Birobidzhan influenced the general public, much of which followed by

⁹⁹Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 8.

¹⁰⁰Interview with Fannie Bakst.

¹⁰¹Birobidzhan: A New Hope for Oppressed Jews, 7.

pledging its support for the Jewish Autonomous Oblast.

Thus it is seen that American and European support for Birobidzhan was based on a strong desire to help the Jews in the Soviet union and Eastern Europe, and an incomplete picture of Jewish life in Birobidzhan and the Soviet Union. This latter aspect was fostered by hopeful optimism, coupled with predominantly Soviet and communist propaganda.

CONCLUSION

Looking closely at the attitudes of the active supporters of Birobidzhan in the Soviet government, the Soviet Jewish communities and Jewish organizations in the West, we see the same motives and issues appearing frequently: the desire to better Jewish conditions, to strengthen the Soviet Union and anti-Semitic motives.

Before beginning my research, I believed a common theory about Birobidzhan. Examining the motives for support, I expected to confirm that the government supported Birobidzhan for anti-Semitic reasons, the Soviet Jews for patriotic reasons, and the foreign Jews for reasons that were spurred by the desire to help improve living conditions for Jews in the Soviet Union. Instead, I discovered that my original hypothesis was grossly simplified and not entirely accurate.

Only with regard to foreign Jews was I correct. The sole concern of Jews in the West was the well-being and cultural freedom of their brethren in the Soviet Union. These Jews possessed enough idealism to never question the nobility of the Soviet government's motives. The Jewish organizations in America which worked with Birobidzhan were generally not communist, but they did support the Soviet government because of its apparent efforts to better the lives of the Soviet Jews.

The Jews in the Soviet Union who rallied behind Birobidzhan were

not only enthusiastic about the growth of the new government and state in the Soviet Union. They, like the Jews in America, were concerned also with the quality of their lives and their ability to retain Jewish communities.

Finally, I was surprised to learn that some members of the Soviet government were interested in the same issues as were the Soviet and foreign Jews; they too wanted to assist the betterment of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. Naturally, the government was also concerned about national security, and Birobidzhan was used as a tool to help secure the Soviet border. Finally, one cannot deny that anti-Semitism, or lack of empathy for the Jews, did play some role in the formation of Birobidzhan.

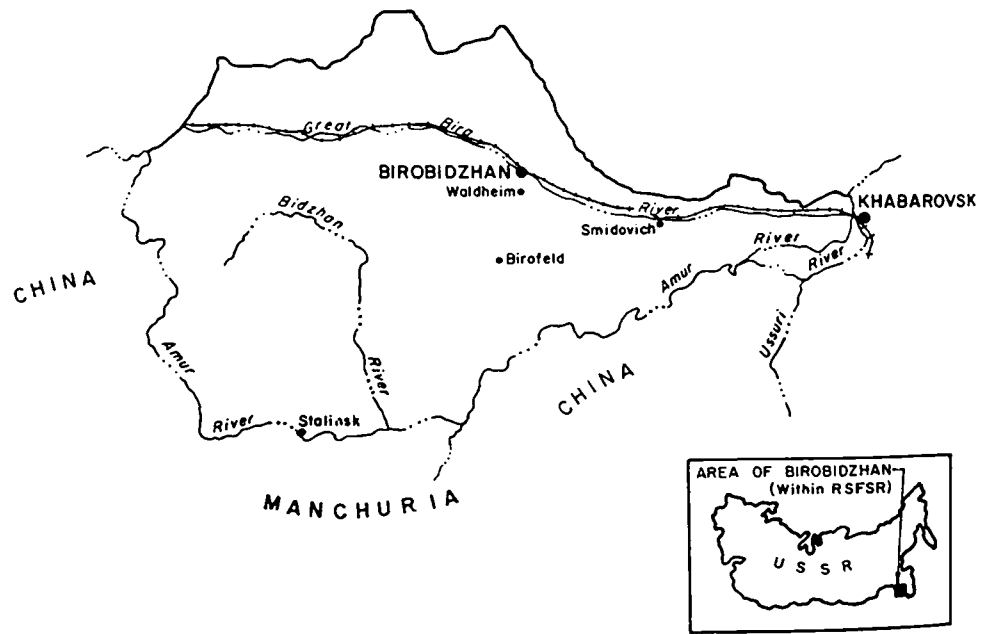
The motivations of the Soviet government and of Soviet and foreign Jews for supporting the establishment of Birobidzhan are complex, but they all fit into three categories: pro-Jewish, patriotic and anti-Semitic. The foreign Jews possessed only the first, the Soviet Jews adopted the first two, and within the Soviet government, all three existed.



PALE OF SETTLEMENT



RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION-- CHANGING BORDERS



BIROBIDZHAN

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