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## The Jewish Autonomous Region in Siberia: multicultural heritage and coexistence

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Alessandro Vitale

## **The Jewish Autonomous Region in Siberia. Multicultural heritage and coexistence**

Technically, Israel is not the only official Jewish homeland in the world. In the Far East of Russian Siberia there still exists the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) of Birobidzhan. Beginning in 1928 the Soviet Union set aside a territory larger than Belgium and Holland combined and considerably bigger than Israel, for Jewish settlement, located some five thousands miles east of Moscow along the Soviet-Chinese border, between the 48<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> parallels north latitude, where the climate and conditions are similar to Ontario and Michigan. Believing that Soviet Jewish people, like other national minorities, deserved a territorial homeland, the Soviet regime decided to settle a territory that in 1934 would become the Jewish Autonomous Region. The idea was to create a new Zion – in a move to counterweight to Palestine – where a “proletarian Jewish culture” based on Yiddish language could be developed. In fact, the establishment of the JAR was the first instance of an officially acknowledged Jewish national territory since ancient times: the “First Israel”. But the history of the Region was tragic and the experiment failed. Nevertheless, Birobidzhan’s renewed existence of today and the revival of Jewish life in the post-Soviet JAR are not only a curious legacy of Soviet national policy, but after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the worldwide religious rebirth represent an interesting case-study in order to study some challenging geographic problems, and interethnic relations.

**Key words:** interethnic relations, interethnic cooperation, Jewish Autonomous Region, JAR, Siberia, post-Soviet Russia, Birobidzhan, Khabarovsky Krai.

*S'iz a lange mayse... A mayse far zikh...*  
 (“It’s a long story...a story in itself...”, as they say in *Yiddish*...)

### **1. Introduction**

Strange as it may seem, the case-study of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan in post-Soviet Russia is quite interesting under many aspects, particularly in interethnic relations analysis, ethnopolitics, interethnic cooperation and coexistence.

In the Russian Far East there still can be found (officially and formally) a Jewish enclave that has existed for over seventy years. (Fig. 1) Beginning in

1928 the Soviet Union set aside a territory larger than Belgium and Holland combined, and considerably bigger than Israel, located some five thousands miles east of Moscow along the Soviet-Chinese border, close to Khabarovsk, along the Trans-Siberian Railway (completed in 1916). Believing that Soviet Jewry, like other national minorities, deserved a territorial homeland, the Soviet regime decided, following Stalinist theory of nationalities, to build a Jewish *enclave* that in 1934 would become the Jewish Autonomous Region, popularly known as Birobidzhan, reflecting the name of the Region's capital city, located on the rivers Bira and Bidzhan<sup>1</sup>. The Soviet political class hoped that Birobidzhan would serve as an alternative to Palestine by fostering the development of a secular, non-religious and Yiddish Jewish<sup>2</sup> culture rooted in Socialist principles in order to build a future Jewish-socialist utopia. In the 1920's communist officials hoped to reorganize at the same time the occupational profile of the Jews living in the Western part of the former Empire by transforming them into farmers and thus "productive" members of the "Soviet economy". The creation of JAR was meant to counter both Zionism and religious Judaism by creating an atheist, Soviet version of Zion. Thousands of Soviet Jews flooded into the area, some fired with the enthusiasm to build a new society, others merely hungry and looking for a chance to improve their living conditions and to change their way of life. Jewish pioneers were lured to Birobidzhan by a concerted and planned propaganda effort. Even many American, Argentinean and other Jews from all over the world escaped the Depression to start their "new life" in the Jewish Socialist utopia.

The JAR is the only specifically Jewish political entity other than Israel to be established in modern times. In fact, the establishment of the JAR (in Yiddish: *Yidishe Avtonome Gegnt*) was the first instance of an officially acknowledged Jewish national territory since ancient times and an unprecedented opportunity for the Jews<sup>3</sup>. But the history of the Region was tragic and the experiment of the "First Israel" failed (Vaiserman 1999). Nevertheless, that region's "Jewish" status has survived incredible deprivations and persecutions, Stalin's purges and

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<sup>1</sup> But only the Bira flows through the town.

<sup>2</sup> *Yiddish*, rather than *ivrit* (Hebrew, עברית) – considered the tongue of "bourgeois Zionist" – was chosen as the "regional language". The building of a "Yiddishland" only ten years after the Revolution, raised many hopes among Jewish people that had suffered from pogroms and persecutions for a long time before 1917 especially in the Western part of the Russian Empire. See: M. Kadyshovich (1931), M. Alberton (1932), Y. Lvavi (1965), A. Kagedan (1987, 1994), J.J. Stephan (1994).

<sup>3</sup> The JAR was the first and the only (administrative) territorial unit of the Jewish people not only in the USSR, and Israel was established on a UN's solution only in 1948, namely twenty years later.

anti-Semitism before and after World War II, destructions of libraries<sup>4</sup>, the fall of communism and Birobidzhan's continued, renewed existence and the revival of Jewish life in the post-Soviet JAR are not only a curious legacy of Soviet national policy, but after the break-up of the USSR and the religious worldwide rebirth, represent an interesting case-study in order to examine some geographic problems and interethnic relations.



Fig. 1. Distance between Moscow and the JAR

Source: author's own elaboration based on <http://www.slate.com>

Birobidzhan's history remains, as one of the most controversial attempts in the struggle for a Jewish homeland. Nowadays the Region's economic prosperity, combined with its renewed Yiddish heritage<sup>5</sup>, helps to create a soil for a Jewish local future, but remembering that membership of a national minority shall be a matter of free personal choice and no disadvantage shall result from the choice of such membership. Moreover, JAR's new generations have no idea of their Jewish roots<sup>6</sup>. A large part of the inhabitants is Jewish, but

<sup>4</sup> The purges even led to the burning of the entire *Judaica collection* in Birobidzhan's local libraries. In 1948 Soviet bureaucrats closed the last Jewish school in Birobidzhan.

<sup>5</sup> Jewish culture was revived here much earlier than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. In the last twenty years Jewish culture and especially *Yiddishkai* has started to revive. A new synagogue was opened in 2004. There are new extensive links between the JAR and Israel, despite a long time of problems. Jewish life is reviving, both in quantity as in quality (Srebrnik 2006).

<sup>6</sup> There were many mixed marriages and a lot of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, so many people did not write down in their internal passports that they were Jewish.

they often just ignore it. The coexistence between Jewish, Orthodox, and Muslim religions and cultures is a remarkable example of the spontaneous and non planned co-operative side of ethnopolitics.

## 2. Some surprising and fascinating historical events

In the 1920s the Soviet government made several efforts to build a Jewish homeland in Ukraine and Crimea but the projects met local resistance and were soon abandoned. In March of 1928, the government decided to create an area in the Amur River Basin for “settlement by working people of Jewish Nationality”. Stalin wrote in 1913 that nations without territory were not “real”.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Jews in the Soviet Union were at the same time an extra-territorial national minority, a religious community in an atheist state, and an ethnic group on the brink of assimilation into Sovietism. Stalin’s theory of the “National Question” held that a group could be a nation only if its members had a territory, and since there was no Jewish territory, *per se*, the Jews were not a nation and did not have national rights. Moreover, in the 1920s the Party determined that the Jewish economic life was “ideologically suspect”. Jewish communists argued that the way to solve this ideological dilemma could be to settle a Jewish territory, and building a “Soviet Jewish homeland” as an ideological alternative to Zionism. In fact, the Birobidzhan project was at the same time also coherent with the objectives of Jewish nationalism known as “territorialism, which preached the formation of a sovereign Jewish political community in a suitable territory anywhere in the world. Besides, that project followed other attempted solutions of settlements in agricultural areas in Argentina, Australia, Canada, and the U.S., and even the well known project of the creation of a Jewish polity in Uganda. In the Soviet Union during the interwar years Jewish people were mostly poor, and underrepresented in industry and agriculture. By creating a special area for the Jews in the regions of the Russian Far East, the Soviet government hoped to accomplish several things. First, the Kremlin selected this particular territory to redirect the movement of the Jews to the land away from Ukraine, Belarus and Crimea, where the native inhabitants resisted to Jewish settlement<sup>8</sup>. Second, they

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<sup>7</sup> A nation, according to Stalin, was a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture (J.V. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, first published in: “Prosveshcheniye”, No. 3–5, March–May 1913).

<sup>8</sup> In 1928 Jews had deep roots in the Western part of the Soviet Union, in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. In fact, initially they were proposed to be moved into a new “Jewish Soviet Republic” projected for the Crimean Peninsula or Ukraine, but the projects were

would create a “homeland” for working Jewish people in an area where there would be no local backlash and in order to control the Jewish ethnic component of the Soviet Empire. The main idea was to create a new “Soviet Zion”, where a “proletarian Jewish culture” could be developed. Yiddish, rather than *ivrit*, would be the national language, and new socialist literature and arts would replace religion as the primary expression of the culture.

Some observers and historians have claimed that Stalin was also motivated by anti-Semitism in selecting Birobidzhan: in fact he wanted to keep the Jews as far away from the centre of power as possible. At any rate, the government and the KOMZET (the *Committee on Land Settlement of the Working Jews*) decided to create a “homeland” for compact moving of the Jews. By devoting resources and land to the Jews, the government tried to attract Jewish money and settlers from abroad and even from all over the world: America, Argentina, and Europe<sup>9</sup>. The project could also stimulate political support for the Soviet Union in the international arena. Settling and developing a region on the border with China would be at the same time a strategic step in strengthening Soviet control over the whole area of the Soviet far East and its natural resources (fish, iron, timber, tin, gold and graphite). Settling and developing a region bordering China would be a strategic step in strengthening Soviet control over this very relevant geo-strategic area. This territory, annexed by Russia in 1858, was also selected in order to buffer the Soviet Union from Chinese and Japanese expansionism.

Jewish settlements were created in small villages. But there were large tracts of swampland and marshes. After the first wave of immigrants, over the next ten years a total of 35,000 Jews came to this area, mixing with the Cossacks, Ukrainians, and the Koreans (about 27,000), already living there. Central government started relocating thousands of Jews to the area, using the Trans-Siberian railway<sup>10</sup>. Birobidzhan was built by artisans and craftspeople, as members of a massive, voluntary immigration. The perspective of revival of a Jewish political unity, even as autonomy, found the response abroad, first of all

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abandoned because of the hostility of non-Jews against Jewish people in those regions of the Union (Gitelman 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Historians have argued that in this conjunction, the treatment of the Jews in the Soviet Union was a feather on the Red cap and the endeavour to create a national Jewish administrative unit would be bound to create a measure of sympathy (Goldberg 1961, p. 170). See also: B.I. Bruk (1928), E. Bugaenko (1984), B. Arnowitz (1985), A. Kuchenbecker (1997).

<sup>10</sup> The 5,000 mile journey from Moscow to Birobidzhan today takes six days; the same journey took, at that time, more than a month.

among the American Diaspora. Ambijan<sup>11</sup>, Agro-Joint and ICOR (*Idishe Kolonizatsye Organizatsye; Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union*, born in 1924 in America) made huge contributions to the project (see Srebrnik 2006, 2008, 2010). The ICOR rendered free material help to the settlers. The apparent revival of a sovereign Jewish autonomous territory stimulated the afflux of immigrants from abroad: they sincerely believed that the Soviet Union could become a democratic people's state and – in 1929 – the only true solution to the Great Depression and the great crisis of capitalism<sup>12</sup>. Almost 700 people from Lithuania, Argentina, Latvia, France, Germany, Belgium, USA, and Poland and even several hundreds from Palestine, who had become disillusioned with the Zionist experience went to JAR. Many sent money and machinery, while perhaps one to two thousands Jews decided to move to the purported “Soviet Zion” during the 1930s. But early conditions of living were terrible and crude: the land was swampy and the winter harsh. Some settlers had to live in *zemlyanki*, huts of sod and thatch, built over a hole in the ground. The first settlers found a swampland – freezing cold in winter, hot and rainy in summer, and the majority of settlers were not familiar with agriculture. Little was done to prepare the settlers, many of whom had never worked the land in their lives. The government totally failed to provide decent housing, food, medical care, and working conditions. Severe floods ravaged the region and some collective farms had to be started anew. Nevertheless, despite a new wave of emigration from the Region (many settlers stayed there very briefly), some immigrants decided to remain, building the settlements of Waldheim, Tikhonkaya (later Birobidzhan), Amurzet in the south of the Region and others. Jewish settlements were created in small villages (Birofeld, Danilovka, etc.) that connected the Trans-Siberian railway with the Amur River valley (Fig. 2).

By 1934, 22,000 Jews had come to the Region, a few more than 5,000 had stayed to work and live, most residing in kolkhozes. They did their best to preserve a secular Yiddish culture through schools, theatres, clubs and libraries. As the Jewish population grew, so did the impact of Yiddish culture on the JAR. Multinational culture and art were developed very fast in the Region. Several regional newspapers, a literary, art and political magazine were issued. Some magazines published the works of the largest Soviet Jewish writers and poets. Success in development of culture of the Region was an achievement of its first

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Einstein served as honorary President of the *American Birobidzhan Committee (Ambijan)*.

<sup>12</sup> A government-produced Yiddish film called *Seekers of Happiness* told the story of a Jewish family that fled the Great Depression in the United States to make a new life for itself in Birobidzhan.

builders, those people who gave a part of their soul and heart to this land. During the Region's first decade of existence, along with Russian, Yiddish became the official language of the Region. In 1935, following a government decree, all the governmental and party's documents appeared in both Russian and Yiddish.

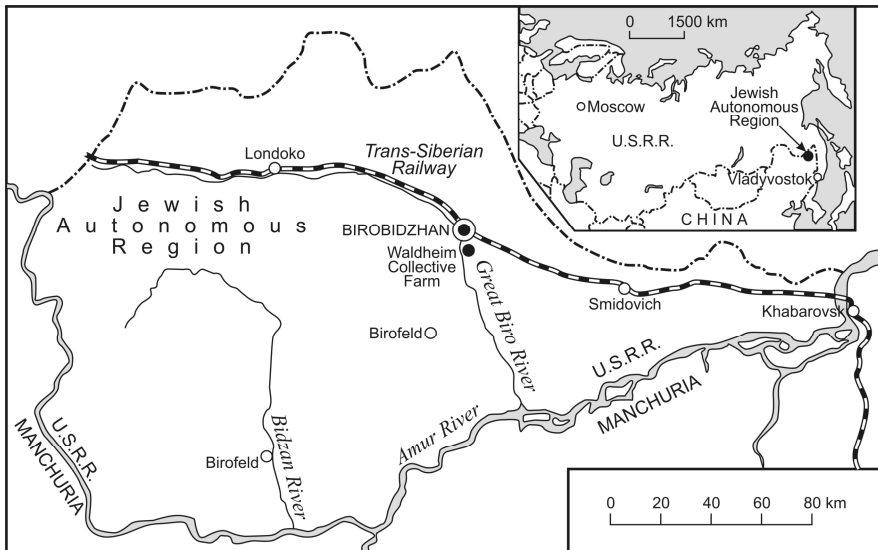


Fig. 2. The geographical conformation of the JAR

Source: author's own elaboration based on *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol. 4, 1971.

The Russian population, and even Cossacks, contrary to what happened in the Western part of Empire<sup>13</sup>, gave them all possible support. There were no tensions between Jews and Cossacks or with the community of ethnic Koreans that settled those lands after escaping Japanese labour camps in Manchuria. Many villages and collective farms sent instructors, who trained settlers in agriculture. In total, from 1928 to 1933, 22,300 persons went to the Region.

Despite efforts to encourage Jewish people to resettle in the Region during the first decade of its existence and again for a few years after the end of World War II, the Birobidzhan's experiment failed. By 1939 just less than 18,000 of the Region's approximately 109,000 inhabitants were ethnically Jews. The city of Birobidzhan boasted 30,000 residents by the end of decade. Soviet Jews were more inclined to move to one of the main cities in the western Soviet Union, such as Minsk, Leningrad, Kiev, Moscow, or Odessa, than to uproot themselves

<sup>13</sup> During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Cossacks, ancient defenders of Russian Empire known for their military prowess, conducted vicious pogroms against Jews. After the Revolution, the last remnants of their autonomy disappeared.



to the marshes of Birobidzhan, where there were limited educational and job opportunities. Moreover, as the Soviet Union became a totalitarian state ruled by Stalin's iron fist in the late 1930s, and purges swept the country, JAR's leadership was decimated and accused of all manner of ideological heresies. Basically, the Kremlin's attitude toward Jews turned hostile by the time of the Great Purges of 1936–1938, when the regime clamped down on Jewish settlement. Less than 10 years after the creation of the JAR, Stalin began to destroy the local Jewish culture. Yiddish books were burnt, Jewish schools, and the synagogue were closed down. The government dismantled agencies dealing with Jewish resettlement, shut down many cultural and social Jewish institutions, and promoted cultural assimilation of the Jews. Thousands of Jews were imprisoned and killed. The Soviet regime stifled the emergence of Jewish culture and society in the Region. Since the first days of World War II the economy of the Region shifted to war production. Consequently, even if not intentionally, for the third time the JAR saved Jewish people from starvation (the first was the settlement, the second during the *Holodomor*, the intentionally provoked famine in Ukraine with approximately 7 million of horrible deaths) and from Nazi persecutions. In the wake of World War II, the Kremlin revived in 1946 and 1947 Jewish migration to Birobidzhan and created a revival of Yiddish culture. The three post-war years, when the country had been destroyed, were the years of the best prosperity of local Jews culture and industrial building of the local civil society. Another wave of Jewish immigrants flooded the Region. Between 1946 and 1948, perhaps as many as 10,000 Jews moved to the JAR. During 1947 and 1948 twelve special trains brought approximately 6,500 Jewish settlers, primarily from Ukraine, to the JAR. During World War II anti-Semitism was one of the reasons for the increase in solidarity among the Jewish people. Germany's aggression toward the Jewish people intensified national feeling among them. This increased the interest of the world's Jewry in the JAR as well<sup>14</sup>.

By the end of 1948, when the State of Israel was established (the Soviet Union promoted its building and was the first country to recognize it), 30,000 Jews lived in Birobidzhan. In the streets of the city, of many villages and settlements Yiddish was heard as often as Russian. Soviet control over the area became less stern. Jewish cultural life was resuscitated and a synagogue was opened in 1947. But the emergence of government-sponsored anti-Semitism

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<sup>14</sup> *Einigkeit*, the Yiddish newspaper published in Moscow, often referred to the Jewish immigrants' desire to take part in building the future of the Jewish Region. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee played the major role in attracting the attention of government officials on the Birobidzhan Project (Emiot 1981, pp. 2–3).

during the last years of Stalin's life<sup>15</sup> destroyed any hope that Birobidzhan could develop into a centre of Soviet Jewish life. The number of Jewish demands for expatriation documents to Israel increased and Stalin brutally changed the policy towards Jewish people inside the country. All traces of Jewish culture in the JAR were wiped out, with the exception of the newspaper in Yiddish *Birobidzhaner Stern* and radio programming, which were virtual translations of *Pravda*. Yiddish schools, theatres and the synagogue were closed again. The practice of Judaism was discouraged; the teaching of Yiddish was curtailed. The revival of the "Birobidzhan idea" ended with the Doctor's plot (1952), and Stalin's second wave of purges, shortly before his death. Although the Jewish people used to be almost the majority in the Region, their number started to decline inexorably. In the ensuing years the idea of an autonomous Jewish region in the Soviet Union was all but forgotten. Even those Jews who really believed in a future Jewish Republic and contributed to the development of Birobidzhan, were executed during the purges of 1930s and 1940s. These purges, not only liquidated the Jewish administrators and intellectuals, but also erased basic elements of the Jewish nationality and culture.

### 3. The JAR after the collapse of the Soviet Union

By the time the USSR collapsed in 1991 and when Russia and Israel established diplomatic relations, most of remaining Jewish population left for Israel and Germany. Many Jewish families left the Region for Israel at the beginning of the '90s. The remaining Jews officially are now less than 3% of the inhabitants, but in fact it is uncertain how many Jews live in the Region. Probably, of the current population of over 200,000 in the JAR, no more than a few thousand are Jewish. Moreover, still there has been a noticeable revival of Jewish life. Yiddish is once again taught in public schools and still remains one of the official languages of the Region. Jewish culture and literature are studied in all the JAR's schools, where study a mix of Jewish and gentile children study, including Koreans and Chinese. Everyone is interested in Yiddish and Judaism. Many non-Jewish parents say that since they live in the JAR, they want their children to know about Jewish history, language and culture. The Birobidzhan National University is unique in the Russian Far East. The basis of the training course is study of the Hebrew language, history and classic Jewish texts. The newspaper *Birobidzhaner Stern*, one of the few of its kind all over the world, has been published continuously since the early 1930s, except when World War II

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<sup>15</sup> Stalin imprisoned prominent Jews and burned 30,000 Yiddish books in the public library of Birobidzhan.

interrupted its publication for several years (it was shut down by a decree), even if some efforts were made to “russify” Yiddish culture<sup>16</sup>. Also a Yiddish radio and television programming still operate. In the early 1990s the offices displayed everywhere plaques in both Russian and Yiddish, despite the fact that Jewish people numbered no more than several thousand inhabitants. But culture in Yiddish flourished, attracting more than 40,000 Jews from all over the world. The JAR now hosts an International Festival of Jewish culture, an annual event since 1988. The JAR’s economy, based on mining, agriculture, lumber, and light manufacturing, is doing well also because of the intensive exchange with Chinese people living beyond the Amur border. JAR’s gross regional product has reportedly increased 50% since 2000. Its well-developed industrial and agricultural sectors and its rich resources in minerals and building materials are in great demand with “booming” export of raw materials to China. Cattle and poultry are raised on the rich grassland, and an abundance of nectar-producing plants creates favourable conditions for beekeeping (Srebrnik 2006, p. 18). Water is also abundant. The Amur River connects the JAR to the Pacific Ocean. The Trans-Siberian railway links the Region with Russia, East Asia, and the Pacific.

In the last few years the ethnic and socio-cultural composition have changed significantly as some residents are now less afraid to announce their Jewish background, decided the rebirth both of Yiddish and modern Jewish cultures and after the decision of a significant numbers of Jews to come back to the JAR from Israel (Vitale 2005a, b, 2007). Something unusual is happening: many Jews are moving to Birobidzhan every year. The autonomy caused the building of regional and federal bodies of executive authority<sup>17</sup>. But what is more important,

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<sup>16</sup> The most notable of these was an attempt to replace Hebrew alphabet used for writing Yiddish with the cyrillic alphabet. The Yiddish section of the *Birobidzhaner Stern* is edited by Elena Sarashevskaja, who is not Jewish. She learned Yiddish and realized that this ancient language «Is not only a language, it is about Jewish history and literature, our culture».

<sup>17</sup> In December 1990 the Congress of People’s Deputies of the Russian Republic proposed an amendment to the text of the Constitution of the former RSFSR, changing the administrative division of the Russian Federation. It proclaimed that henceforth autonomous regions were included directly into the structure of Federation. Some radical deputies of the Regional Council in 1991 persistently tried to proclaim the Jewish “Autonomous Republic”, but this proposal did not come true. At the same time the amendment to the Constitution was taken into account. On October 29, 1991 the regional Council of People’s Deputies accepted the Declaration “on state-legal status” of the JAR. The same year the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR decided to separate the Jewish Autonomous Region from the Khabarovsk Region. As a result, the Jewish Autonomous Region became an independent subject of the Russian Federation.

nowadays in the Region there are an evident spontaneous cooperation and close relations between religions, schools, institutions, in the absence of interethnic tensions and conflicts. The cooperation consists, first of all, in the realization of joint charitable actions and cultural events. Birobidzhan's children (Jews and non-Jews) learn together about Jewish tradition. The local youth has never known what anti-Semitism is. They may discover it (with great surprise and unforeseen frustration) only studying and moving to the Western part of Russia. Children grow up, play and learn together in schools where Jewish culture is widespread. Despite Soviet persecutions, Jewish people and non-Jews have lived in the Region for over sixty years in peace. Therefore this case-study may be important for ethnic research beyond the case of JAR and as a possibility in developing policy strategies for managing ethnic conflicts, cultural, and religious diversities.

#### **4. Demographic problems of the JAR and the coexistence**

According to the 2010 Russian census, there were only 1,628, mostly older, Jews living in the region, out of a total population of around 167,000. The official figures were 160,185 ethnic Russians (92.7%), 4,871 ethnic Ukrainians (2.8%), 1,182 Belarusians (0.62%), and 1,628 ethnic Jews (1%). According to a 2012 official survey, 22.6% of the population of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast adheres to the Russian Orthodox Church, 9% are unaffiliated generic Christians, 6% adheres to other Orthodox Churches. Judaism is practiced by 0.2% of the population. In addition, 35% of the population deems itself to be "spiritual but not religious", 22% is atheist, and 5.2% follows other religions or did not give an answer to the question.

The leading position among religions belongs to Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy. Two Jewish communities also work actively. The Birobidzhan Jewish religious community "Frejd" has been created in July 1997. There is close cooperation between Orthodox parishes and the Birobidzhan Jewish cultural and religious communities and now also between the main groups and the Muslims. Orthodox parishes donated many financial contributions for the building of the synagogue. The immigration of Muslim people from Central Asia to the JAR has consistently increased since 2008. The Jewish community has created for Muslims good conditions of religious activity and cooperation. The coexistence with Muslims and mutual respect is today the most challenging and interesting development of the JAR.

Nowadays inhabitants of the Region believe that there's a real chance that a thriving Jewish community could be established in Birobidzhan. Although the

city's Jewish population – depleted by the large *aliyah* wave (emigration to Israel) of the 1990s – hovers between 2,000 and 6,000, the Region's economic prosperity, combined with its Yiddish heritage and return from Israel help to create rich soil for a Jewish future. Even if there's still great confusion between Birobidzhan's Yiddish heritage, which is both linguistic and cultural, and the Jewish practice that rabbis and foreign Jewish organizations are trying to encourage, the rebirth of the religious activity in the Region is remarkable. In 2003 a Rabbi went to the Region from Israel and a new Synagogue was built. Jewish people in the Region have continued to mark Jewish holidays, and the older people remembered their Yiddish and Jewish traditions, which are taught in public schools not as Jewish exotica, but as part of the Region's "national heritage". Many people in the Region (even of different ethnic origins) discover their Jewish roots, and embrace them. Ten years ago, many of those who left didn't want to proclaim themselves as Jewish. But people define themselves by Jewish characteristics and talk about how their grandmothers and great-grandmothers practiced Jewish faith. The Jewish community in the JAR has a more solid base than in 1995 and a greater sense of permanence. Jewish children learn about their history and traditions in summer camps. Consequently, a Jewish cultural revival is under way. Basically, the Jewish Region retained identity despite emigration. Not everyone who moved to the Holy Land decided to stay in Israel forever (Vitale 2005a, b). Some Jews are moving from Israel to Birobidzhan today because of intense sense of strangeness in the Palestine and homesickness for Siberian magnificent wildlife.

Besides, there is now in the JAR a new kind of "regional patriotism". Indeed, the JAR lacks cultural exclusivism, uniformity, discrimination, ethnocentrism, typical of every kind of nationalism (Wehler 2001), and self-isolation of an ethnic minority from another. The community developed spontaneous forms of cultural and religious syncretism and of mutual comprehension among different ethnic groups (Nivat 2013). The roots the inhabitants feel in common are not a product of a single identity, or a fruit of assimilation, but of the coexistence with different people, of mutual respect, frequent interactions, common history that creates a plot of links between individuals and groups (Connor 1994<sup>18</sup>). Moreover, the Siberian "territory of frontier" contributed to the development of strong ties with the earth and the other settlers; a sort of "communitarian *mythomoteur*" (Smith 1986, p. 72)<sup>19</sup> that constantly renews itself and that does not disappear in the Jewish people that moved to Israel. The "ethnic revival" of Jewish people (Rotschild 1981) stimulated also children born from mixed

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<sup>18</sup> Italian transl.: Bari (1995, pp. 103–104, 234).

<sup>19</sup> Italian transl.: Bologna (1992, p. 72).

marriages (contrary to what happened in the communities of Jewish people in the Western part of the former Soviet Union) not to strive for assimilation but highlight each distinctive characteristics of the different cultures inhabiting the Region, despite not having known their own origins for so long. To this contributes the renaissance of an “active Jewish culture” and the elimination of the old contrast (of Soviet type) between Yiddish culture and Hebraism. The “active culture” (Gitelman 1991), contrary to the Jewish “passive” culture of the Soviet period<sup>20</sup>, in fact has stimulated a constant process of identity-building.

Judaism in Birobidzhan takes a totally different physiognomy toward the exclusivity of blood (descendant from mother) and religion. The non-Jewish people feel mostly culture, a sort of integral way of life, an historically-based identity, as some scholars define it (Schnapper 1980, p. 38) that do not stop to the vision of current Hebraism. In this way local Hebraism managed to product forms of cultural patterns of reference that created the base for a culture rooted on proud Jewish characteristics shared by inhabitants that became the constituent myth of local community, the identity source, and “the culture of reference”. Territoriality means in this case a process of personal and collective identification and identity-building.

Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians who have reached the Region in different times consider this Region as their own and they have often described their traditions as rooted in Jewish history, viewed as their own history. Their interest in Jewish culture, habits, everyday’s way of life, and cuisine is developing along with their interest in Yiddish language. Consequently, despite the fact that throughout the world many languages are in danger of dying out completely, Yiddish is experiencing there a consistent revival. The Jewish people of the Region do not consider themselves as members of the world’s Jewish Diaspora but think the Region simply as one of many “world’s Hebraism twigs”. In other words, they do not feel themselves as “carriers” of a “vicarious nationalism” (Smith 1986)<sup>21</sup>, referred to other ethno-national fragments dispersed in different parts of the world.

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<sup>20</sup> The Bolsheviks tried to build an atmosphere where the Jewish culture would be a passive one. However, the Jews were different from other ethnic groups (nations) in Russia, because there was somehow a religious identity tied with the cultural identity. The aim of the assimilation was to get rid of the religious identity. However, it was obvious that the void would need to be filled with something. A secular Yiddish culture with “a socialist base” seemed to be a good approach.

<sup>21</sup> Italian transl.: Bologna 1992, p. 314.

## 5. The preservation of pacific interethnic relations in the JAR

Thus, the most interesting characteristics and unique feature of the Jewish Region are in my view the formation and the consolidation of local identity of regional kind that come directly from its history. As M.J. Esman (1994, p. 15) wrote: "Ethnic identity can be located on a spectrum between primordial historic continuities and instrumental opportunistic adaptations". Even though the Jewish Autonomous Region was created in 1934 to control the Jewish component of the Soviet Union with apartheid, assimilation and fusion (*slijanie nacij*: the fusion of nationalities) between the different ethno-national components, this process did not occur. In fact, there is no cultural homogeneity or assimilation, even though many characteristics, typical of different peoples living in the Region, became common. The Region's inhabitants were used to seize different cultures, take what is better one from another for generations. This aspect became greater with the end of the Soviet era, because it became normal to declare one's own Jewish nationality, or to refer to this culture, even taking advantages, as for immigration to Israel.

This historical aspect, with the spirit given by enthusiastic descendents of first Jewish settlers, was fundamental in the building of a superb regional identity that became quite normal for the coexistence among people taking the characteristics of Jewish culture. But the cultures in the Region remained separated. Today a cooperative behaviour dominates, one that was always stimulated by natural conditions, by the need to solve common problems of a typical Siberian region. Hence the integration that occurred in the Jewish Autonomous Region is far from the one elaborated by the theorists of the assimilation. The reality of today's living together is the opposite of the assimilation paradigm (according to the Sociological School of Chicago of the first half of the twentieth century) that considers culture static and homogeneous: the most interesting fact is that ethnic identifications have not disappeared, nor even darkened. There did not occur an assumption of values, rules, and models of behaviour (seen as static and not changeable) by minorities acquired from the majority group, resulting in the loss of their ethnic distinctive characters with the fusion of differences – a process that R.E. Park and E.W. Burgess (1921) considered inevitable. Particularly, in this case there is strong interest in the local Jewish characteristics as a unique heritage in the world, as a common point of reference, and as a source of regional and local pride. Even mixed marriages were not able to create neither an amalgam, nor assimilation. Mixed marriages were not considered dangerous for cultural reasons in the Region, as it frequently happened among Zionists living in Russia or in the Diaspora. On the contrary, those marriages have stimulated cultural life, and the enrichment of the Jewish culture

of the Region. Rather there was always awareness of relevance of ethnic differences, and those have always been considered able to enrich one another. The bilingual skills, the interest for the Yiddish renaissance, schools, teaching Jewish world culture, definitively show the vitality of these mutual relations. On the other hand, the sense of dominant insecurity, typical of the contemporary “society of uncertainty” (Bauman 1999), is absent.

The most interesting feature is the non-existence of ethnic prejudices such as the anti-Semitism that in Russia experienced long and dramatic history. Young people know anti-Semitism only when they go to study into the Russia’s Western cities or abroad but they cannot even understand the meaning of this phenomenon, very curious and quite incomprehensible for them.

The Jewish people of the Region were able to refuse the assimilation, seeking soft forms of ethno-national conscience not in contrast with multicultural coexistence, but stimulating imitation. As a result, there was a process of “approaching” (Bromley 1979), and “adaptation (Smith 1981)<sup>22</sup>. Ethnic groups of different origins, completely different in terms of cultural characteristics, took many aspects from other groups, producing common cultural traits. It corresponds to new approaches to the problem of integration<sup>23</sup>: the culture, a basic element of the people, is seen as a syncretised phenomenon in permanent evolution, as a target of amalgam of different influences. This is the reason why “natural assimilation” (Connor 1994<sup>24</sup>, Waldenberg 1992) coming from cultural everyday’s interactions, did not occur. Reciprocal “acculturation” – typical of the conceptions of the twentieth century, (whether American or Soviet), and which is seen as a certain product of the succeeding of generations (“straight-line assimilation”) – became untrue in the JAR. A “reactive ethnicity”, able to stimulate the “feeling of us” against the “other”, did not take form. Nowadays the diversity-management in the JAR is based on cultural (not only Jewish) institutions that continue an old tradition of spontaneous cooperation between different ethnic groups, promoting an inherited management and way of life at material and spiritual levels. Indeed, cooperation is evident in the meetings, in shared holidays, in common celebrations of public events, as e.g. in the meaningful annual “Festival of Slavic and Jewish culture”. Cultural innovative programs continuously promote the diversity-management and the interethnic coexistence, based on a very interesting widespread Jewish “local patriotism”.

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<sup>22</sup> Italian transl.: Bologna 1984, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, R. Alba, V. Nee (1997, pp. 826–874).

<sup>24</sup> Italian transl.: Bari 1995, p. 34.



## 6. Permanent obstacles created by an overcentralized political system

In 2013 the Russian government has announced a plan to offer US \$ 8,000 (including direct financial assistance, airline ticket, coverage of moving expenses, and health insurance) to any immigrants – they even do not have to be Russian nationals – who would be willing to relocate to the JAR. The government has expressed concern that the Far East Russia is being overrun by Chinese immigrants and is menaced by an impeding “demographic disaster”. However, the potentialities given by the cooperation and coexistence are still permanently obstructed by two political problems: the difficulties of a steady protection of minorities – even though they do not have typical problems of the condition of minorities – through constitutional tools (federalism, and stable self-rule)<sup>25</sup>, and the difficulty to protect the Region from strong interferences by the centralized power, that always could threaten the delicate, unique balance between ethnic groups peacefully living in the Region. A possible “imbalance” stimulated by the political centralization and its obsessive planning could today encourage even a new emigration of Jewish people to Israel.

The present political system of post-Soviet Russia does not offer guarantees for the development of this kind of spontaneous diversity-management in the Region, and for keeping pluralism and coexistence. This dangerous political system is an increasingly “apparent federal system”, a still Soviet type “*façade federalism*” that can revoke at any time the status of autonomy and can impose hard conditions able to destroy this balance of spontaneously self-formed relations. Moreover, Russia’s political order is still characterized by the national-territorial principle (the recognition – of Soviet origin – of a nationality as “owner” of a territory) in the definition of administrative rule of autonomous Republics and Regions. The “cosmetic autonomies” (Nosov 1996, p. 208, Vitale 1999) and the sham federalism (Taylor 2011, p. 113) are only a mirror of a hierarchic-vertical system, federal only in appearance<sup>26</sup>: a sort of *fédéralisme inauthentique* (Beaud 1996, p. 42), *de facto* aborted and based on the dependency relation between centre and periphery (Sharlet 1994, p. 125). There is not parity between federal subjects and Federation, regulated by intergovernmental relations as in other federations. The JAR loses even its financial independence.

<sup>25</sup> See R. Schlesinger (1970), A. Smith (1986), A. Vitale (1999), H.-U. Wehler (2001).

<sup>26</sup> On this definition see L.M. Bassani, W.H. Stewart, A. Vitale (1995). On the formal federal structure of Russia, redesigned by centralization of Yeltsin in 1993, R. Sharlet (1994, pp. 115–127), and *Introduction*, in: *La Costituzione della Federazione Russa*, ISPI, Milan 1994. Translation and ed. A. Vitale.

Furthermore, the post-Soviet political system is based on the idea of autonomous ethnically homogenous entities: the most threatening for the system itself (Elazar 1987)<sup>27</sup>. This condition is more and more likely to generate new problems among local minorities. When constituent unities of federations are based on the principle of ethnic homogeneity, this raises the force of external attraction that can causes internal interethnic conflicts<sup>28</sup>. Basically, federalism and self-rule work only without ethnic homogeneous federate entities. Jewish people never constituted a majority in the Region but it remains in fact Jewish in culture. This fact made it harder for the Jewish national and cultural institutions to dominate the Region (Goldberg 1961, p. 226) even if it's truly remarkable how much *yidishkayt*, in all of its variety, can endure, and Putin's efforts seemed more designed to cripple a nascent civil society rather than to help it to mature and grow (Taylor 2011, p. 204).

Increasing centralization makes centre-periphery relations particularly tense. Similarly, hierarchic administrative levels remain influent and the dependencies from centralized decisions can worsen several problems in the delicate system of interethnic relations in the JAR. In fact, the centralized government could always intervene in linguistic, cultural, demographic, ethnic and religious policy, altering the balance given by the original coexistence and of the specific "regional patriotism", based on a sense of cultural affinity.

Be that as it may, the Region depends from decision-making of the higher political level, and from the centralized government, that constantly threatens the self-governing groups, and risks to paralyze the activity of the independent organizations of local civil society, fundamental for the cultural and political renaissance of the Region. Only an authentic federal system with shared rule, self-rule, and limited-rule could consolidate the spontaneous formation of the interethnic coexistence inside the Region. Indeed, as wrote A.D. Smith (1986)<sup>29</sup>: "The federal solutions help to minimize the ethnic antagonisms and to assure the political recognition to territorialized entities and cultures". Only the evolution of self-rule in an authentic federal system could preserve the Region from permanent threats of centralized power decisions, potentially dangerous for the interethnic relations management.

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<sup>27</sup> Italian transl.: (Milan 1995, p. 194). The ethnic nationalism is the most egocentric (and irreducible) form of nationalism, the most complicated base to build a system of constitutional power-sharing. Language, religion, national myths and so on, tend to divide the people.

<sup>28</sup> External pressures on ethnic not satisfied minorities can produce interethnic conflicts (Duchacek 1987, p. 288).

<sup>29</sup> Italian transl.: Bologna (1992, p. 547).

The Birobidzhan project may still have relevance today as an example of unexpected consequences of national planned system which as a result produced spontaneous ethnic coexistence, despite its location within a permanent hostile political system that lacks the ability to renew itself.

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## **Żydowski Obwód Autonomiczny na Syberii. Wielokulturowe dziedzictwo i współistnienie**

### **Streszczenie**

Formalnie rzecz biorąc, Izrael nie jest jedyną oficjalną ojczyzną Żydów na świecie. W azjatyckiej części Rosji, na Syberii, nadal istnieje Żydowski Obwód Autonomiczny w Birobidżanie. Począwszy od 1928 r. Związek Radziecki przeznaczył na osiedlenie Żydów terytorium większe niż Belgia i Holandia razem wzięte i znacznie większe niż Izrael, usytuowane ponad 6 tys. km na wschód od Moskwy, wzdłuż granicy rosyjsko-chińskiej, pomiędzy 48 i 40 stopniem szerokości północnej, gdzie klimat i warunki są podobne do Ontario i Michigan. Wierząc, że Żydzi rosyjscy, podobnie jak inne mniejszości narodowe, zasługują na własne terytorium, reżim sowiecki zdecydował ustanowić terytorium, które w 1934 r. stało się Żydowskim Obwodem Autonomicznym. Ideą było utworzenie Nowego Syjonu – jako przeciwwagi do Palestyny – gdzie „proletariacko-żydowska kultura”, oparta na języku jidysz, mogła się rozwijać. W rzeczywistości ustanowienie Żydowskiego Obwodu Autonomicznego było w pierwszym rządzie oficjalnym uznaniem narodowego terytorium Żydów od czasów starożytnych: „Pierwszego Izraela”. Ale historia tego regionu była tragiczna i eksperyment nie powiódł się. Jednakże odnowione dzisiaj istnienie Birobidżanu i odrodzenie żydowskiego życia w sowieckim Żydowskim Obwodzie Autonomicznym są nie tylko ciekawym spadkiem po sowieckiej narodowej polityce, ale też po rozpadzie Związku Radzieckiego, i religijnym odrodzeniu na świecie; tym samym stanowią interesujące studium przypadku do badań niektórych ambitnych problemów geograficznych i stosunków międzyetnicznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** stosunki międzyetniczne, współpraca międzyetniczna, Żydowski Obwód Autonomiczny, Syberia, Birobidżan, Chabarowski Kraj.

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