

# Nation Making in Russia's Jewish Autonomous Oblast: Initial Goals and Surprising Results

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Today in Russia's Jewish Autonomous Oblast (*Yevreiskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast*, or EAO), the nontitular, predominately Russian political leadership has embraced the specifically national aspects of their oblast's history. In fact, the EAO is undergoing a rebirth of national consciousness and culture in the name of a titular group that has mostly disappeared. According to the 1989 Soviet census, Jews compose only 4 percent (8,887/214,085) of the EAO's population; a figure that is decreasing as emigration continues.<sup>1</sup>

In seeking to uncover the reasons for this phenomenon, I argue that the presence of economic and political incentives has motivated the political leadership of the EAO to employ cultural symbols and to construct a history in its effort to legitimize and thus preserve its designation as an autonomous subject of the Russian Federation. As long as the EAO maintains its status as one of eighty-nine federation subjects, the political power of the current elites will be maintained and the region will be in a more beneficial position from which to achieve economic recovery.

The founding in 1928 of the Birobidzhan Jewish National Raion (as the territory was called until the creation of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in 1934) was an outgrowth of Lenin's general policy toward the non-Russian nationalities. In the aftermath of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks faced the difficult task of consolidating their power in the midst of civil war. In order to attract the support of non-Russians, Lenin oversaw the construction of a federal system designed to ease the fears of—and thus appease—non-Russians and to serve as an example of Soviet tolerance toward colonized peoples throughout the world. Soviet ethnofederalism, as Lenin envisioned it, would not only help the Soviets win the civil war but would also promote the worldwide revolution begun in Russia.

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Lenin was willing to make initial concessions to the nationalities because he believed that, with the achievement of worldwide communism, the internationalization of the proletariat would transcend national differences. At the basis of this concessionary policy was Lenin's willingness to grant territorial recognition to federal units.

By August 1924, the Committee for the Rural Placement of Working Jews (*Komitet po Zemel'nomu Ustroistvu Trudyaschikhsya Evreev* or *Komzet*) was created as the party organization to devise and then implement a plan for Jewish resettlement. To solicit support and financing from the international Jewish community, a parallel, non-party organization called the Public Committee for the Rural Placement of Jewish Workers (*Obschestvennyi Komitet po Zemel'nomu Ustroistvu Evreiskikh Trudyaschikhsya* or *Ozet*) was also created in the same period.<sup>2</sup> At the core of both of these organizations was the belief that the Soviet Jewish issue should be dealt with in a typically Leninist manner. That is, if the Jews were colonized in a compact agricultural settlement, they could organize their political and economic lives as a cohesive autonomous unit of the Soviet federation.

However, *Komzet* had little influence on the process by which a site for the Jewish autonomy was selected. Although *Komzet* had already begun a number of Jewish resettlement projects in the Crimea and Ukraine, the Soviet elite chose a relatively untouched area along the southern border of the Russian Far East as the site for Jewish territorialization. This choice was entirely unexpected because it was based on a far different set of criteria than those that had previously shaped *Komzet's* efforts. The decision to locate Jewish resettlement near the intersection of the Bira and Bidzhan rivers along the Chinese border was based primarily on the general military and economic interests of the center rather than on the specific interests of the Jewish population. Stalin was eager to accelerate the settlement of this Far East territory in order to provide a human shield against potential attacks from Japan or China. In addition, although the harsh climate and poor soil would make agricultural development difficult, the area was rich with natural resources that party leaders intended to exploit.<sup>3</sup>

Despite opposition from many members of *Komzet* who favored the Crimea as the most logical location, support by Mikhail Kalinin, nominal head of the Soviet state, and by military and economic interests made the idea of a Far Eastern Jewish autonomy a reality. In 1927, a party-sponsored research group working in the Far East concluded that, due to the lack of development and remoteness of the territory, resettlement should not begin before 1929.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, with prompting and guidance from Kalinin and the party's most powerful elites, the Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet approved a formal request by *Komzet* in March 1928 to begin Jewish resettlement in Birobidzhan.<sup>5</sup> By the end of that spring, 654 Jews, mostly from Ukraine, resettled to Birobidzhan.<sup>6</sup> In the next few years, levels of Jewish immigration continued to rise, so that by 1930 Jews composed 8 percent (1,500/37,000) of Birobidzhan's population.<sup>7</sup>

In 1932, amid collectivization and famine in Ukraine, Jewish immigration to Birobidzhan reached its apex, as 14,000 settlers made the long trek to the Far East. But just as the levels of settlement rose, so did the numbers of immigrants

who gave up on the Jewish territory, apparently having decided that the misery of collectivization in their previous territories was preferable to the hopelessness of this nascent Jewish autonomy. Of the 654 Jews who arrived by the spring of 1928, 325 (49.7 percent) had departed by October because of the severe conditions that faced the region's earliest settlers. While estimates vary as to how many of the Jewish settlers of 1932 departed, a member of *Ozet* guessed 80 percent while the first party secretary of Birobidzhan said 66 percent.<sup>8</sup>

As the resettlement figure for 1932 illustrates, the Soviet propaganda campaign for Birobidzhan experienced some initial success in attracting Jewish settlers to the territory. On the one hand, promises of limited political autonomy and economic opportunity were an effective means of convincing Jewish members of the country's downtrodden population to seek out this Soviet promised land. On the other hand, the Soviets were restricted from making any specifically national or religious appeals that might have attracted larger numbers of Jews to the region and been a more effective means of inspiring the early immigrants to withstand the physical and emotional difficulties of resettlement. In the propaganda directed to encourage Jewish resettlement in Birobidzhan, the Soviets were confined to utilizing economic and political incentives because of the limitations of their own ideology. The following excerpt from a 1932 issue of *Tribuna*, the official newspaper of *Ozet*, typifies the Birobidzhan propaganda campaign:

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 in the Far East.<sup>9</sup>

This quote demonstrates that although party leaders might have been eager to create the world's first specifically designated Jewish territory, they attempted to do so without relying on the Zionist imagery and rhetoric that were a central component of the more accepted non-Soviet effort to establish a Jewish homeland. As the Birobidzhan historian David Vayserman points out, the fact that the Jewish resettlement effort was oriented in opposition to, rather than in concert with, the traditional symbols of Jewish culture and history was a major reason for its failure. According to Vayserman:

The Jews—this is a nationality. This is a faith. This is Judaism. . . . This is the Torah, the Old Testament. There was never any of this [here]. The Party categorically banned synagogues. . . . How could the Jews build their own territory without their fundamental roots?<sup>10</sup>

To augment his point, Vayserman recounts many conversations he has had with Jews who, even though they were devoted Communists, chose to immigrate to Palestine instead of Birobidzhan in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

They said "We knew that they were building Birobidzhan but we didn't go there. We went to Palestine. We have already dreamed of building on this land . . . the land of our ancestors."<sup>11</sup>

As Vayserman's quote demonstrates, party leaders were unwise to portray the EAO as the socialist—and generally preferable—alternative to Palestine, because for those Jews who truly aspired to the goal of national self-preservation, the historical and religious significance of the land that became Israel was unmatched. Nonetheless, the Soviets were not hesitant to pursue this competitive strategy, as exemplified by a 1930 Soviet pamphlet, in which Birobidzhan was described as “such a place as, by the wealth of its natural resources, is adapted for the mass resettlement of the Jews” while Palestine was dismissed as “incapable of providing a piece of bread for the scores of thousands of Jews so swindled.”<sup>12</sup>

This comparison reveals the extent to which the Soviets misunderstood the nationalities issue. Zionists were inspired to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine because of their historical and religious attachment to that particular territory rather than for economic reasons. Thus, an analysis of the founding of the EAO reveals the existence of principles that were inherently contradictory. On the one hand, the Soviets believed they could create an ethnic homeland from scratch by providing the territory and absorbing the costs of resettlement. On the other hand, they attempted to achieve this goal with a general disregard for the sense of national purpose and territorial or historical attachment that are central to any nation-building effort. The Soviets' insistence on this second principle made the fulfillment of the first principle—at least as they envisioned it—impossible.

If the goal of Lenin's initial nationality policy was to achieve the short-term preservation of titular consciousness and identity among non-Russian national groups, then the methods used to achieve this goal were undeniably successful. In fact, at the all-Union level, the Soviets' willingness to grant territorial recognition to non-Russian groups planted the seeds of their revolution's collapse. By providing the limited cultural autonomies and promotion of titular elites that began with *korenizatsiya*, the Soviets preserved the sense of indigenous nationhood in the union republics that, in confluence with a number of other processes and events (for example, *demokratizatsiya*, the August 1991 coup), developed into the national movements that accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this same period, a similar process occurred within many of the national-territorial units of the Russian Federation, a process that hastened the development of renewed titular consciousness from Tatarstan to Yakutia-Sakha. Such a process of national renewal also occurred in the EAO, where the movement to increase political powers and initiate economic recovery spurred a revitalization of indigenous culture and historical consciousness.

By linking territory and ethnicity in a vast, undeveloped territory, the Soviets initiated the process by which the people and politics of the EAO became nationalized. In this process, the creation of an officially recognized national territory provided the fundamental objective structures through which the social world was perceived. If, as Bourdieu suggests, an objective structure is “independent of the consciousness,” then the nationalization of space occurs when the constructs of the objective world are internalized.<sup>13</sup> When the objective structures of the EAO became the “mental structures” through which both Jews and members of the dif-

ferent national groups came to perceive the social world, this vast territory had truly become a hybrid Jewish homeland.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Soviet federalism was responsible not only for erecting the objective structures that led to the construction of an indigenous conception of nationhood within the EAO, but it also fueled—through *korenizatsiya*—the process by which these structures became internalized. Foremost among the policies of *korenizatsiya* was the promotion of titular elites and languages. In the EAO, for example, the number of Jewish party and administrative officials was usually disproportionate to the size of the local Jewish population. According to Feliks Ryansky, director of the EAO's Institute for the Analysis of Regional Problems, Jews "were in all the posts," particularly in deputy and other assistant positions, throughout the Soviet period and "even in 1991."<sup>15</sup> Even until the year of the Soviet Union's collapse, decades after party leaders had abandoned their original plan of achieving a Jewish homeland with a sizable titular population, the oblast's first party secretary, Boris Korsunsky, was a Jew. As the presence of Jews among the oblast's regional elite stayed constant, and so did the commitment to the promotion of the official titular language, though few residents were able to speak it. Even as the number of Jews living in the EAO eventually settled at a level well below the number of both ethnic Russians and Ukrainians (1989 Soviet census: Russians, 83 percent; Ukrainians, 7 percent; Jews, 4 percent), Yiddish language and culture continued to be offered in schools and the local pedagogical institute. The Yiddish-language newspaper *Birobidzhaner Shtern* (circulation 5,000) was published four times a week. While it is important to note that expressions of Jewish culture were banished almost entirely during the Stalinist purges of the late 1940s, they eventually re-emerged and came to play a significant and accepted role in the social life of the EAO.

On visiting the EAO, I was struck by the lasting symbols and manifestations of Jewish culture. For example, at each of the Trans-Siberian railway's six stops in the EAO, the name of each town is spelled out in equal-sized Cyrillic and Yiddish letters. Throughout Birobidzhan, there are countless signs for streets and buildings, old and new, in Yiddish. At a Sunday afternoon summer picnic with a Ukrainian family, none of the adults (besides me) was surprised when one of the small boys began to sing a Yiddish folk song he learned in school. Another day, when I visited the opening session of summer camp at Jewish State School Number Two—in which, according to the camp's director, more than 20 percent of campers are without a trace of Jewish lineage—young boys and girls of numerous nationalities lit the Sabbath candles and danced to the chords of traditional Jewish music.<sup>16</sup>

However, this popular acceptance of Jewish traditions is not limited to the young. According to Mikhail Klimenkov, the director of the oblast's Bira State Television and Broadcasting Company, the most popular television program throughout the region is the regular Friday program hosted by Larisa Milchina on Jewish culture and history.<sup>17</sup> Klimenkov admits that when Milchina first approached him with a proposal for the show, he "definitely thought it wouldn't work considering that only about 4 percent of the population are Jews."<sup>18</sup> But Kli-

menkov's concerns were assuaged in 1994 when, in the midst of an oblast-wide survey of television viewers, he traveled to the EAO's Leninsky Raion "where there are hardly any Jews" and discovered that in this "agricultural population of Cossacks, Russians, and Ukrainians almost all named the program "Kavchek" (Milchina's program) among the programs that they watched and that interested them."<sup>19</sup> According to Klimentov, the survey results from Leninsky were matched by similar figures from each of the oblast's other raions.

The popularity of "Kavchek" (ark) demonstrates how nontitular residents of the EAO have come to perceive a connection with the culture of their territory's first settlers. One reason that "Kavchek" has been so successful in nurturing and even capitalizing on this connection is that it presents Jewish culture and tradition in a nonthreatening, accessible fashion. "The way Larisa does this program is very mild," explains Klimentov.<sup>20</sup> "Her goal is simply to explain in general who the Jewish people are. So this doesn't offend anyone."<sup>21</sup>

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This rebirth of national culture, as exemplified by "Kavchek," does not aim to supplant any person's identity as an ethnic Russian or Ukrainian but, rather, works to undergird regional loyalties with a particular Jewish element. While language and cultural policies in other regions of the former Soviet Union have attempted to establish national dominion over other, often minority, national groups, the strategy in the EAO is entirely different. As Milchina points out, "the main task of the program is to stir up interest."<sup>22</sup> She believes that her program is able to tap into the passive interest of the oblast's nontitular population because "television is not like a newspaper."<sup>23</sup> "When you take a Jewish newspaper," she says, "you take it because you want to read about Jewish culture."<sup>24</sup> The key to Jewish television programming, Milchina continues, is that "we are in every apartment . . . and many people who see our program begin to understand that this [Jewish culture and tradition] is interesting."<sup>25</sup> Thus, people are watching not merely because the subjects covered are unfamiliar and unusual for Russian television, but because of their connection to the Jewish people, which, fostered by their residence in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, inspires them to learn more.

This is not to say, however, that what has occurred in the EAO is a universal phenomenon and that an ethnic Russian living in Ukraine, for example, will necessarily identify his or her interests as a Ukrainian. In fact, the nation-building process within the EAO should be considered as unique, if not unprecedented, for a variety of reasons. Although the territory was designated as a Jewish homeland by the Soviet government, the land had no legacy of Jewish history or attachment. Thus, whatever claim ethnic Jews or any other national group had to the

territory was based upon the rhetoric of Soviet leaders during the initial propaganda campaign for resettlement in Birobidzhan, rhetoric that served to promote the idea of a Jewish autonomy. Despite the fact that prospects for massive resettlement to the area dwindled and the center became less willing to publicly endorse the project, the institutions and traditions meant to facilitate the creation of this Jewish state remained. It was as if this experiment in nation building had suddenly been abandoned by the center but the necessary instruments and materials established to achieve the initial goal were left in place.

More than sixty years after this “experiment” was abandoned, the nation-making instruments are still in place with both the consent and encouragement of the oblast’s ethnic Russian political elites. These leaders have chosen to preserve traditions of Yiddish-language and cultural promotion because they are seen by many of the non-Jewish citizens—in both Birobidzhan and the small villages throughout the oblast—as a central component of their national identity and historical attachment.

This Jewish component remains because the particular national legacy linked with it is inseparably intertwined in history with the process by which this particular territory was created and developed. If it were not for the Soviet campaign to found a non-Zionist Jewish homeland, the EAO of today—not only its streets, buildings, and factories but its history and symbols—would not exist, and Birobidzhan and the other small towns of the region would be indistinguishable from hundreds of other small towns throughout the Russian Far East. Without this original sense of national purpose and identity, this area would not be united and demarcated within the federal hierarchy as one of eighty-nine subjects of the Russian Federation, putting it, at least on paper, on equal footing with other subjects such as Moscow, Sverdlovsk, and Tatarstan.

In the quest to preserve the Jewish-related components of the oblast’s everyday life (for example, Yiddish storefronts and street signs, Jewish television programming), the EAO’s earliest history has assumed a new significance. Among the most important and recognized portrayals of this history is David Vayserman’s *Kak Eto Bylo?* (How It Was). In his book, Vayserman, who is Jewish, documents the first two decades of the EAO’s existence with particular emphasis on the struggles of the first settlers. One of the main lessons he expects readers to gain is that the continuing emigration of those few remaining Jews should not diminish the heroic achievements of their predecessors, without whom the autonomy would not exist today. As he writes,

Yes, many are emigrating. But many are also remaining. And how great their wish is today to realize their own historical fate. They cannot agree with the assertion spreading today that the work of . . . their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers has been wasted. For them, the fatherland continues to remain a fatherland. They perceive the tragic history of the EAO not as a hopeless dead end, but as a truthful source of knowledge from which it is possible to obtain the strength and courage so necessary in this harsh time.<sup>26</sup>

For Vayserman, the EAO’s earliest days should inspire the present-day residents of the region to meet the challenges of the post-Soviet era with the same

vigor and determination as their "fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers" did seven decades ago.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, indigenous national movements arose in many of the national-territorial units with the goal of reinventing perceptions of national identity and purpose on a non-Communist basis. In Ukraine and the Baltic states, the symbols and heroes from prerevolutionary times proved more than capable of mobilizing the masses into successful popular campaigns for political independence. In the EAO, however, there was no titular mass to mobilize and no prerevolutionary history on which to fall back.

For a national movement within the EAO to be successful, it would have to be based on its particular Jewish history. Vayserman's book makes a contribution not only by giving "historical depth to nationality" but by providing a general analysis of the territory's earliest history that is capable of being absorbed and appreciated by each of the EAO's residents, regardless of nationality.<sup>27</sup> These citizens can relate to the achievements of their territory's first settlers not as an ethnic Russian, Ukrainian, or even a Jew, but as residents of the EAO.

Along with Vayserman's construction of local history, some other instruments that have facilitated the internalization of objective structures within the EAO are the abundance of Yiddish-language storefronts and signposts. Judging by the fact that 0.4 percent (1,037/214,085) of citizens surveyed in the 1989 census claimed Yiddish as their native tongue and only 0.2 percent (578/214,085) are able to speak Yiddish, these symbols of a common past are of little practical use.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, there are no efforts underway to change the name of Birobidzhan's main street, named for the famous Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem, as the population of ethnic Jews continues to dwindle. For the same reason, *Birobidzhaner Shtern* continues to publish four of its eight pages in Yiddish despite the fact that even its chief editor, Inna Dmitrienko, admits that "few" people in Birobidzhan, and no one in the other towns of the oblast, are able to read it.<sup>29</sup> Does it make sense that the official newspaper of the oblast administration (meaning that *Shtern* depends on the administration for its funding) publishes half of its pages in a language that 99.8 percent of the territory's population is unable to read? In Dmitrienko's words, *Shtern* must continue to publish in Yiddish because "it is a tradition . . . [and] we do not want to lose this language."<sup>30</sup> In fact, *Shtern* continues to publish in Yiddish for the same reason that Yiddish-language street signs and storefronts are maintained. These symbols, or objective structures, of the EAO's founding culture and its initial purpose still provide the territory with its reason for existence; a function that is even more important in the post-Soviet period when the underlying ideological foundation of the federation has disappeared.

The synagogue in Birobidzhan is another example of the oblast's Jewish origins whose purpose is more symbolic than practical. While dozens of Birobidzhaners, regardless of nationality, can proudly tell a visitor that there is a synagogue in town, few know exactly where it is. When the synagogue is finally located, the visitor will soon learn that this building is used by a local Christian group rather than by Jews. Thus, the only synagogue in the oblast performs a function similar to the Yiddish storefronts and street signs; it stands as a reminder

to each of the city's residents of the shared history that undergirds the creation and continuing existence of the EAO. It matters little that there is no rabbi in town or that the local Jews do not even use the synagogue. Instead, this relic of the EAO's Jewish origins exists for the same reason that a war monument was recently erected in the center of town—to honor the achievements and legacies of this territory's earlier residents, regardless of their nationality.

This sense of shared consciousness among the residents of the EAO should be seen as having an undeniable national component that, if overlooked, could cause one to misidentify the underlying ideological foundation of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast as solely a regional or local attachment. The construction of local history and prevalence of Jewish symbols have provided significant contributions to the process by which the achievements of the first Jewish settlers to the region have become popularized and accepted by residents of each national group. In the absence of a pre-existing history and the collapse of the formerly dominant ideology, the multinational citizens of the EAO have come to see the Jewish history of the oblast as their own. Even though the Soviets had forsaken their initial plans to create a non-Zionist, Soviet Jewish homeland, the nation-making instruments (for example, territorial recognition, promotion of titular elites, and languages) utilized to achieve these goals were left in place. As a result, the objective structures established by the Soviets became internalized and both the territory and people living on it were nationalized.

By the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization of the party's long-standing controls over Soviet social and political life had fueled a revival of national consciousness and identity throughout the Soviet Union. With the revival of titular consciousness among non-Russian national groups, political elites in the national-territorial divisions of the Russian Federation followed the example of the union republics and organized national movements to demand their political and economic interests from the Soviet and, ultimately, Russian center. The mobilization of such a nationality-based political sovereignty movement in the EAO provides further proof of the sense of collective national consciousness—as well as the limits to which this sentiment could be expressed—that had developed in the Jewish autonomy. In the midst of the "Parade of Sovereignties," the period beginning in 1990 in which Russia's republics and autonomous oblasts sought aggressively and often unilaterally to gain more advantageous relations with Moscow, the EAO obtained its "sovereignty" through a decree issued by Boris Yeltsin in the immediate aftermath of his election as president of Russia.

Yeltsin's sovereignty decree in the summer of 1991 separated the EAO from the Khabarovsk Krai as the Jewish autonomy became a subject of the Russian Federation. More specifically, this promotion within the federal hierarchy meant that the EAO was no longer a subordinated component of the larger krai and that its parliament and executive branch could act independently, without oversight from Khabarovsk, in its relations with the federal ministries in Moscow. Although the EAO's sovereignty was due more to the revolutionary fever sweeping the country than the emergence of a nationality-based mass movement, Yeltsin's decree brought the EAO closer to the goal, declared by Kalinin and its earliest

settlers, of becoming the Soviet Jewish republic. As it turned out, however, the EAO was the only autonomous oblast within the Russian Federation that did not become a republic, although the differences between these two federal entities were eventually blurred in the 1993 constitution.

Despite the EAO's failure to become a republic, the oblast is presently in a stronger position, at least in the eyes of its political and academic elites, to achieve economic recovery than it was before 1991. According to Boris Korsunsky, who served as both first party secretary of the EAO and as chairman of the oblast's Congress of People's Deputies until November 1991, the autonomy was "developed at a slower rate" as a subordinated component of the Khabarovsk Krai.<sup>31</sup> Birobidzhan mayor Viktor Bolotnov

commented further that "as an appendage of the Khabarovsk Krai" the oblast remained predominantly agricultural as most of the "economic potential was concentrated in Khabarovsk."<sup>32</sup>

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Based on my own impressions and countless informal conversations with residents throughout the EAO, I observed the general perception among locals that, as Korsunsky and Bolotnov suggest, conditions in the Jewish autonomy are significantly worse than in the neighboring territories of Khabarovsk Krai and Amurskaya Oblast. And even though much of Russia has experienced a debilitating fall in production and living standards, conditions in the EAO appeared particularly acute. Of the four factories (mobile harvesting combines, shoes, knitwear, and lumber processing) in Birobidzhan, three (all but the lumber factory) had suspended operations during my stay because the employees were no longer willing to work without wages. The situation was similar for local agricultural workers. On my visit to the Valdheim Kolkhoz on the outskirts of Birobidzhan, I met one young farmer who told me that he had not received his monthly salary of 200,000 rubles (approximately U.S.\$40) in four months. As a result, he said, he was one of the few who still bothered to show up for work. In fact, it appeared that most Birobidzhaners, who would otherwise be working in one of the closed factories or on the deserted collective farm, spent most of their time tending to their private plots and dachas outside the town. As one elderly grandmother told me, "In Moscow they go to their dachas to relax and stay cool. We go to our dachas to work because we want to eat in the winter."<sup>33</sup>

The EAO's underdeveloped transportation system, much like its industry and agriculture, contributes to the difficulties of commerce and everyday life in the region. Although the Trans-Siberian railway traverses the northern tier of the EAO, most of the oblast's residents rely on automobiles for travel throughout the region. Within Birobidzhan, only a few of the main roads are paved, and many

sections have been dug up and apparently abandoned, making bus and automobile travel difficult. Outside of the city, few of the oblast's roads are paved and, in many places, they are nearly impassable. Due to the difficulty of intercity travel and the lack of an operational airport in the region, residents of the EAO who wish to travel to Blagoveschensk, Khabarovsk, or Vladivostok for business or other purposes are extremely limited in their options. And if one of these residents does not live near one of the stations along the Trans-Siberian railway, their opportunities for travel are restricted even further.

With the poor conditions in industry, agriculture, and transport in mind, the EAO's political elite attempted to use its promotion within the federal hierarchy to initiate an economic recovery. In the 1991 decree of sovereignty for the EAO, Yeltsin made the oblast a free economic zone, allowing its political leadership to have greater control over the determination of local taxes, tariffs, and other aspects of enterprise management.<sup>34</sup> Such an act underscored how dramatically the political and economic powers of the EAO's ruling elite had increased. After having endured for decades in even what most of the local elites consider to be Russia's backwater, these politicians were suddenly freed from Khabarovsk's bureaucratic clutches to direct their own course of development for the oblast. They could now manage this territory, larger than Armenia or Belgium, as a sovereign subject of the federation, dealing directly with Moscow on budgetary issues and other affairs. In order to safeguard these political and economic powers in the wake of the August 1991 coup attempt, Korsunsky attempted to transform the EAO into a republic. Although the coup had failed, the effort by conservative forces to seize control of Gorbachev's faltering rule spurred the leaders of the EAO to maximize and, thus, protect their self-rule, just as it sparked the secession of the union republics. As Korsunsky said, a "more radical question about raising the status of the Jewish autonomy" was raised because of growing concerns about the "path of democratization."<sup>35</sup>

In the fall of 1991, Korsunsky's efforts to pursue this "more radical question" were halted by the Russian Supreme Soviet. However, an analysis of the EAO's unsuccessful republicanization effort demonstrates how political interests have become entwined with the shared sense of national identity within the Jewish autonomy. In the 25 October 1991 Declaration on the State-Legal Status of the Jewish Autonomous Republic, approved by the EAO Congress of People's Deputies under Korsunsky's chairmanship, there is not one reference to the titular language, culture, or history. This document made clear that, unlike the other national autonomies of the Soviet Union, the cultural and language politics of the EAO would remain unaltered. In Article 8 of the declaration, Russian is established as the "state language of the Jewish Autonomous Republic" without even a mention of the titular language.<sup>36</sup> Article 15 forbids the "rousing of international discord, hostility and conflicts" and gives government support to the "affirmation of universal values, harmonizing of relations and equality of peoples of the republic."<sup>37</sup> Another main theme of this document is the clarity with which the EAO assumes control over the natural resources and overall economy of the region. According to Article 10, the "land, its minerals, air space, waters and other natural resources on the territory of

the Jewish Autonomous Republic are the exclusive property of the multinational people of the Republic, which possesses the inalienable and indivisible right to the ownership, use and disposal of them.”<sup>38</sup> The fact that this document includes none of the joint jurisdiction provisions between the center and its subjects—the mechanism by which many questions of ownership and control were decided in the 1993 constitution—demonstrates the extent to which the EAO's political elite valued its control over the region's natural resources.

In the opinion of a number of the participants in this effort to create the Jewish Autonomous Republic, the reason the Supreme Soviet singled out the EAO among the other autonomous oblasts had nothing to do with the proposals for economic sovereignty. According to Ryansky:

The EAO did not become a republic because here the majority of the population was not Jewish and they were against the formation of a Jewish republic. Why were they against it? No one explained it to them. In that time, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh began. They thought that if there would be a republic then Russians would be worse off, that it would be similar to Karabakh.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that the EAO Congress voted to become a republic, despite considerable public opposition, reveals the economic and political incentives by which they were motivated. With broad support among the autonomy's political elite, Korsunsky initiated the “Declaration” of October 1991 to increase the political and economic powers of the oblast's administration, through the articles on local ownership and control, beyond the powers that had earlier been granted to the EAO by Yeltsin's sovereignty decree.

The public opposition to the proposed creation of a Jewish Autonomous Republic reveals the limits to which the oblast's current residents would allow mild and restrained expressions of Jewishness to assume a more overt presence in their everyday lives. Despite the inclusion of numerous provisions in the “Declaration” on the legal equality of different national groups, the establishment of Russian as the state language and the absence of any privilege or advantage for members of the titular nationality, many residents of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast perceived that their status in a Jewish Autonomous Republic would be changed for the worse. Korsunsky blamed a few of “our local public figures” and some members of the regional media who “played a negative role” in the process by which opposition was raised against the issue.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, with the implementation of the 1993 Russian constitution, the main political objectives of the 1991 republicanization effort were achieved. According to Article 5 of the constitution, the federation's national-territorial and territorial subjects were equalized in terms of federal powers. Thus, as the EAO's current governor, Nikolai Volkov, commented, a republicanization movement would no longer be “acceptable” because “it doesn't matter today if the Jewish oblast is a krai, oblast or republic . . . in the constitution it is written that they are all equal.”<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the immediate post-Soviet period, the EAO's political leadership is now no longer concerned with increasing its powers or redefining federal relations with Moscow. Instead, as Volkov, Bolotnov, and their colleagues would

agree, the oblast must take advantage of its heightened sovereignty to develop the region's economy.

### Conclusion

How has the Jewish essence of the EAO been preserved if the initial plans for the Jewish autonomy were abandoned six decades ago? This article demonstrates the paradoxical, though enduring, nation-making power of the Soviets' early nationality policy. The Soviets' insistence on promoting the proposed "Jewish Homeland" without relying on the sense of national purpose, indigenous history, and territorial attachment that have usually provided the core of any nation-building effort doomed the Jewish resettlement program to failure. Despite this, the Soviets' willingness to grant territorial recognition to the Jews, along with the promotion of titular languages and elites, provided a more lasting guarantee of titular culture and consciousness than had been intended.

In the post-Soviet period, the leadership of the EAO, in its effort to achieve political and economic objectives, has embraced the Jewish character that was so central to this region's history and reestablished its place in contemporary society. Such a strategy, manifested in public support for a Yiddish-language newspaper, Jewish television programming, and the maintenance of Yiddish-language storefronts, represents a conscious effort by the EAO's political elite to safeguard the oblast from potential challenges to its privileged federal status and, perhaps, even its right to exist.

Thus, the needs of the EAO's political leadership and the popular beliefs of the general population seem to be in perfect congruence. This has created a mutually reinforcing synergy of political interests and popular consciousness that has affirmed the rebirth of national culture. Consequently, almost seven decades after its creation, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast lives on.

### NOTES

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4. Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 432.
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6. Lionel Kochan, ed., *The Jews in Soviet Russia Since 1917* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 73.
7. Ibid.
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9. Ibid., 71.
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14. Ibid., 130.
15. Interview with Feliks Ryansky conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 4 July 1995.
16. Interview with Anna Piskovets conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 4 July 1995.
17. Interview with Mikhail Klimentov conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 5 July 1995.
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19. Ibid.
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21. Ibid.
22. Interview with Larisa Milchina conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 5 July 1995.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. David Vayserman, *Kak Eto Bylo?* (Birobidzhan: Typografiya Nomer 3, 1993), 5.
27. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1994), 197.
28. *Natsionalnyi Sostav Naseleniya SSSR*, 43-44.
29. Interview with Inna Dmitrienko conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 6 July 1995.
30. Ibid.
31. Interview with Boris Korsunsky conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 5 July 1995.
32. Interview with Viktor Bolotnov conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 20 June 1995.
33. This conversation was with the mother of Olga Adasova on 6 June 1995 in Birobidzhan, Russia. Unfortunately, I never learned her full name because she was always referred to as simply *Babushka* [Grandma].
34. Interview with Ryansky.
35. Interview with Korsunsky.
36. *Declaration on the State-Legal Status of the Jewish Autonomous Republic*. This document was obtained by the author from the archives of the Congress of People's Deputies of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in Birobidzhan, Russia.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Interview with Ryansky.
40. Interview with Korsunsky.
41. Interview with Nikolai Volkov conducted by the author. Birobidzhan, Russia. 9 July 1995.