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THE *JEWISH AUTONOMOUS REGION* OF BIROBIDZHAN IN SIBERIA

Abstract. The *Jewish Autonomous Region* (JAR) of Birobidzhan in Siberia is still alive. The once famous "Siberian Zion", at the confluence of the Bira and Bidzhan rivers, a stone's throw away from China and a day from the Pacific Ocean, 9,000 km and six days by train from Moscow, is still a geographical reality. The political class of the Soviet Union decided to create a territory the size of Belgium for a settlement for Jews, choosing a region on the border between China and the Soviet Union. It believed that Soviet Jews needed, like other national minorities, a homeland with a territory. The Soviet regime thus opted to establish an enclave that would become the JAR in 1934. We should note that the creation of the JAR was the first historically fulfilled case of building an officially recognised Jewish national territory since antiquity and well before Israel. Nevertheless, many historians declared this experiment a failure and the history of the Region only tragic. It is interesting to note, however, that the survival of the JAR in post-Soviet Russia has been not only a historical curiosity, a legacy of Soviet national policy, but today – after the collapse of the Soviet Union – it represents a very interesting case study. It is also a topic useful for the analysis and understanding of inter-ethnic relations, cooperation, and coexistence and it is a unique case of geographic resettlement that produced a special case of "local patriotism", as an example also for different ethnic groups living in the JAR, based on Jewish and Yiddish roots.
Key words: Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR), Russia, Siberia, Birobidzhan, inter-ethnic relations, ethnopolitics.

I have crossed oceans and continents
and I have not found any country as beautiful
as my Birobidzhan.

Yiddish song of the Birobidzhan region

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Goodbye America, goodbye Europe,
good morning our homeland, our Birobidzhan.

Isaak Dunajevsky

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

The Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) of Birobidzhan in Siberia is still alive. For many travellers and journalists, that is still surprising, after many years of silence over the fate of this Soviet experiment. The once famous old "Siberian Zion", at the confluence of the Bira and Bidzhan rivers, a stone's throw away from China and a day from the Pacific Ocean, between the 48th and 49th parallels north latitude (where the climate and conditions are like those of Ontario and Michigan), 9,000 kilometres (and six days by train) from Moscow, very closed to the end of the Trans-Siberian railway, is still a reality. It has been the first modern official Jewish homeland (long before Israel). In 1928, the Soviet Union set aside a territory larger than Belgium and the Netherlands combined, for a Jewish settlement, along the Soviet-Chinese border. With the conviction that Soviet Jews should be provided with a homeland based on territory – in accordance with the Stalinist doctrine of nationalities – the Soviet regime created a Jewish enclave, which in 1934 became the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR, in Yiddish: *Yidishe Avtonomne Gegnt*), popularly known as Biro-bidzhan, giving it a status that would remain identical throughout the Soviet period and post-Soviet Russia. The Soviet political class hoped to create an alternative to Palestine by fostering the development of a secular, non-religious Jewish culture based on the Yiddish language[2] and the principles of socialism, giving rise to a future "Jewish-socialist utopia," counterbalancing Palestine. In fact, the settlement of the JAR aimed to counter both Zionism and religious Judaism by building an atheist Soviet version of Zion (Rovner, 2014, p. 8). The idea to create a Jewish agricultural colony along the border with China coincided with that of settling a strategic buffer against Chinese and Japanese expansion and it was a way of exiling Jews to the hinterland.

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[1] This article is a development, with additions, of previous studies: Vitale (2014); idem (2015). The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable insights.

[2] *Yiddish*, rather than *Ivrit* (Hebrew תירבע) – considered the tongue of "bourgeois Zionists" – was chosen as the "regional language" in clear contrast to *Ivrit*. The building of a *Yiddishland* raised many hopes among Jewish people who had suffered from pogroms and persecutions for a long time before 1917, especially in the Western part of the Russian Empire. See: Kadyshevich (1931), Alberton (1932), Lvavi (1965), Kagedan (1987, 1994), Stepan (1994), Vitale (2007), Srebrnik (2010), Maroney (2010), Polonsky (2011), Nivat (2013), and Plures (2014).

As a result, thousands of Soviet Jews decided to colonise the area, some of them spurred by the desire to build a new society, others simply driven by hunger and the prospect of improving their living conditions. Even many Jews from America, Argentina and other parts of the world, faced with the Great Depression, tried to start a new life in the new Zion of the Jewish socialist utopia. In fact the creation of the JAR was the first case of an officially recognised Jewish national territory since the antiquity.[3] The "Birobidzhan Project" intended to solve the social and economic issues of Russian Jewry, removing any potential support to the Zionist movement. However, the implementation did not enable the project to fulfil its potential (Vladykina, 2016, p. 1285). The "Jewish" status of the region has survived incredible violence, persecution, and deportations, such as Stalin's purges and the never-ending attempts at destroying the local cultural heritage, culture, and libraries.[4] Despite all these problems, the survival and renewed life of the Birobidzhan and the revival of Jewish life and culture in the post-Soviet JAR have proven more than just a curious legacy of Soviet national politics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this example has continued to offer an interesting case study for examining complex geographical and political problems, as well as alternative possibilities for interethnic relations.

According to the working hypothesis, even completely artificial geographical and residential settlements created intentionally and for political reasons – even the most implausible – can produce unplanned and unintentional effects of great significance. Among these, there may be the formation of spontaneous cohabitations, even endowed with their own 'patriotism' and a strong sense of belonging based on different cultures and composite syncretism. In order to answer the research question, the methodology of this research first considers the empirical elements (data collected in the 2000s in field research and the use of statistics to test the relationships between the variables involved). In addition, the research used thematic analysis to interpret the patterns and meanings in the qualitative data because in this case, the quantitative analysis does not answer the research question.

The JAR is still functionally considered a "Jewish region", although probably only a handful of Jews now live there. No one knows how many inhabitants of Jewish descent have remained in the region. Officially there are 8,000: but one inhabitant in two has a Jewish great-grandmother or great-uncle, including the many Koreans and Chinese who live there. Not to mention the countless Ukrainians or Belarusians who have remained living in the Russian Far East. In the present day,

[3] The JAR was the first and the only (administrative) territorial unit of the Jewish people not only in the USSR but also in the world. Israel was established on the UN's solution only twenty years later, in 1948.

[4] The purges even led to the burning of the whole *Judaica Collection* in Birobidzhan's local libraries by Soviet officials. In 1948, Soviet bureaucrats closed the last Jewish school in Birobidzhan. The reason for Stalin's shutting down Yiddish institutions in the JAR was that Yiddish culture could had a hindering effect on his project of the assimilation of Jews.

the region's relative economic prosperity because of its proximity to China, along with its renewed Yiddish cultural heritage, has helped to set the stage for a local Jewish future.[5] This may seem strange at first glance, but not if one considers the fact that citizenship of a national minority is a matter of personal choice and no disadvantage results from that affiliation. The coexistence of Jewish, Orthodox, and now Muslim religions and cultures is a remarkable and noticeable example of an authentic spontaneous, cooperative, and unplanned face of ethnopolitics.

Fig. 1. The geographical location of the JAR
Source: own work.

2. A CONTROVERSIAL GEOGRAPHIC SETTLEMENT

The Kremlin created the Jewish Autonomous Region (*Oblast*) as an administrative tool to solve the "Jewish Question" in Stalin's Soviet Union. 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 hostility because of conflicting attitudes and emerging forms of anti-Semitism and they were soon abandoned.[6]

[5] Jewish culture was revived here much earlier than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. In the last twenty years, Jewish culture and Yidishkayt have been revived. Here *Yiddish* is still spoken and even taught. Some Chinese children also study it. There are new extensive links between the JAR and Israel, and despite a long history of problems and disputes, Jewish life is reviving both in quantity as in quality (Srebrnik, 2006).

[6] In 1928 Jews had deep roots in the Western part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In fact, initially there was a proposal to move them into a new "Jewish Soviet Republic" projected

Therefore, in March 1928 the government populated an area in the Amur River Basin for "settlement by working people of Jewish nationality". This decision resonated with Stalin's 1913 *The National Question* where he stated that nationalities without territory would not be authentic.[7] In the 1920s the Party determined that the Jewish economic life was "ideologically suspicious". In fact, Jews 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. Even Jewish communists agreed that the only way to solve this ideological dilemma would be to populate a Jewish territory, creating a kind of a "Soviet Jewish homeland". The Birobidzhan project was at the same time also coherent with the objectives of Jewish nationalism known as *territorialism*, which preached the building of a Jewish political community in a suitable territory anywhere in the world.[8] This seemed aligned with the designs of the Stalinist and Soviet political class, which aimed to keep Jews as far away as possible from the central territorial and political zones of the Soviet Union. At any rate, the government and the KOMZET (the *Committee on Land Settlement of the Working Jews*) created a "homeland" for the compact transfer of Jews, adapting Jewish communities to agriculture. By devoting resources and land to Jews, the government (which invested very little in the project) tried to attract Jewish money and settlers from all over the world: America, Argentina, and Europe.[9] Moreover, to settle and develop a region on the border with China (on a territory that was annexed by Imperial Russia in 1858) would also be a strategic step in strengthening Soviet control over the whole area of the Soviet Far East and its natural resources (iron, fish, timber, tin, graphite, and gold). In 1934, the Kremlin decided to assign the Region the status of an *autonomous region* (*avtonomnaja oblast'*) to an area comprising 36,000 square km, i.e. larger than that of Palestine. The authorities created Jewish settlements in small villages. The work was very hard. When Jews arrived in the 1930s, there was nothing: only the taiga and marshes. During the time of the Great Purges and later, after the Second World War, Jewish people became the subject

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for the Crimean Peninsula or Ukraine, but the projects were abandoned because of the hostility of non-Jews against Jewish people in those regions of the Union (see Gitelman, 1991). In fact, Jewish resettlement projects created discontent among the local population (in Crimea, notably the Tatars).

[7] According to Stalin, a nation was a historically developed stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture. Therefore, in his doctrine a human group could be a "nation" only if its members had a territory: since there was no actual Jewish territory, Jews were not a nation and did not have national rights at all. See Stalin, 1913.

[8] Territorialism was an attractive option for many Jewish intellectuals. Rovner, 2014, pp. 8–9.

[9] Historians have argued that in this period and under these circumstances, the treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union was regarded as a feather in the red cap, and the effort to create a Jewish national administrative unit would be doomed to create a measure of sympathy (Goldberg, 1961, p. 170). See also Bruk (1928), Bugaenko (1984), Arnowitz (1985), and Kuchenbecker (1997).

of persecution and Jewish institutions were shut down. Thousands of inhabitants of the autonomous region were imprisoned. Some lost their lives. Therefore, the Terror ended the autonomist project: it closed many Yiddish-language schools, and the entire resettlement project ended in a standoff. In the Jewish Autonomous Region migration spontaneously stopped. As a result, the Region became "autonomous" and "Jewish" only in name. After Stalin's death and with the memory of the persecutions of the Great Terror, Soviet Jews left en masse for Israel. Everyone expected a slow end of the JAR. However, some Jews bought pieces of land that they continued to cultivate.

In the late 1980s, although it was difficult to establish precise religious and national affiliations, less than 5% of inhabitants were Jewish. There was only a small wooden synagogue, and it was not officially recognised. However, in recent years, the ethnic and socio-cultural composition has changed, as some residents are now less afraid to claim their Jewish background. Even more importantly, they decided the revive both Yiddish and modern Jewish cultures after the decision of a significant number of Jews to return to the JAR from Israel. Valery Gurevich, the former Vice-chairman of the Regional Government (Jewish, like many of the Region's elected officials), has openly denied that the Region is no longer Jewish (Vitale, 2005, p. 160). Nowadays, in the Region there is a clear rebirth of spontaneous cooperation: different religions are working together establishing meaningful and close relationships within institutions and especially schools, with the clear absence of interethnic tensions and conflicts. The cooperation consists of, firstly, the fulfilment of joint charitable actions and cultural events. Within schools and cultural institutions, Birobidzhan's children (Jews and non-Jews) have long since learned together about the traditions and heritage of global Jews. As a result, the local youth has never known what anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism are, simply because those notions would be very incomprehensible in that context of living. Children grow up, play and learn together in schools where the Jewish culture is nurtured, made known, and loved. Despite Soviet persecution and the incredible difficulties with surviving, Jewish people and non-Jews have lived in peace in the Region for over sixty years without ethnic clashes. What is noteworthy is that the Jewish culture has spontaneously risen from the ruins of Stalin's incredible experiment reluctantly conceived by the Kremlin.

3. THE GLORIOUS AND TRAGIC HISTORY OF THE JAR

After the first wave of immigrants, 35,000 Jews came over the following ten years to Birobidzhan, mixing locally with Ukrainians, Cossacks, and Koreans (approx. 27,000), peoples who were already living there. The Kremlin moved

Jews to the Siberian area, using the Trans-Siberian railway. The 5,000-mile journey from Moscow to Birobidzhan takes today six days; the same journey took more than a month back then. Artisans and craftspeople, the descendants of the impoverished *shtetls* of the Western part of the Russian Empire, as members of massive, voluntary immigration built Birobidzhan. However, the early living conditions were terrible and so crude that some settlers lived in *zemlyanki*, huts of sod and thatch, built over a hole in the ground. It is noteworthy that most settlers were not familiar with agriculture at all. State administration did very little to prepare them, and many had never worked the land in their lives. The government failed to provide decent housing, food, healthcare, and working conditions. Severe floods ravaged the region and some collective farms had to be started anew. Despite a fresh wave of emigration from the region (many settlers stayed there briefly), some immigrants remained, building the settlements of Waldheim, Tikhonkaya (later Birobidzhan), Amurzet in the South of the Region, and others. They created Jewish settlements in small villages (Birofeld, Danilovka, etc.) connecting the Trans-Siberian railway with the Amur River valley.

The perspective of the revival of Jewish political, "autonomous" unity, resonated even abroad, first among the American diaspora. Ambijan[10], Agro-Joint and ICOR (*Idishe Kolonizatsy Organizatsye; Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union*, established in 1924 in America) made huge contributions to the Birobidzhan project (Srebrnik, 2006, 2008, 2010). The ICOR rendered free material help to the settlers. The initial, apparent revival of a "self-governed" territory stimulated the *pull factor* for further immigration from abroad. Jews from other countries sincerely believed that the Soviet Union would become an authentic people's democracy, a state of all the people, without having to struggle to survive. In 1929–1930, it also appeared as a genuine solution and alternative to the Great Depression, which was becoming the symbol of the "great crisis of capitalism."[11] Therefore, almost 700 people from Lithuania, Argentina, Latvia, France, Germany, Belgium, USA, and Poland and even several hundred from Palestine[12] went to the JAR. Many left-wing Jews and pro-Soviet organisations in, e.g. the United States and Canada followed the events in Birobidzhan from a distance. Many of the organisations that brought them together sent money, equipment, and machinery. Other settlers (up to 2,000) went to the supposed "Soviet Zion" during the 1930s.

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[10] Albert Einstein served as honorary President of the American Birobidzhan Committee (*Ambijan*).

[11] Significantly, in these years 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 start anew in Birobidzhan.

[12] The propaganda impact was so effective that several thousand Jews immigrated to Birobidzhan from outside the Soviet Union, including several hundred from Palestine as they had become disillusioned with the Zionist experience.

By 1934, 22,000 Jews had come to the JAR; a few over 5,000 remained to work living in kolkhozes. They did their best to preserve a secular Yiddish culture[13] through operating theatres, schools, clubs, and libraries. The Russian population and even Cossacks already living there (contrary to what happened in the Western part of the Empire)[14], supported their efforts. There were no tensions between Jews and Cossacks or with the community of ethnic Koreans that settled those lands after escaping from Japanese labour camps in Manchuria. Many villages and collective farms sent instructors who trained the settlers in agriculture. From 1928 up to 1933, 22,300 persons went to the region. In the mid-1930s, Birobidzhan was hailed the growing centre of Yiddish culture; Jewish artists were encouraged to settle there. As the Jewish population grew, so did the impact of Yiddish culture on the region (Emiot, 1981, p. XV). In the Jewish Autonomous Region a multi-ethnic culture, forms of religious syncretism, and new artistic and literary forms developed quickly. The circulation of many regional newspapers and literary, artistic, and political magazines began. During the first decade of its existence, Yiddish became the official language in the region, along with Russian. In 1935, following a government decree, all official and party documents were published in Russian and Yiddish.

However, despite the state's efforts to encourage Soviet Jews to settle in the region during the first decade of its existence and again after the Second World War, the region failed to attract further Jewish settlers. As a result, by 1939 less than 18,000 of the region's approximately 109,000 inhabitants were "ethnically Jews". The operations of the police department, courts and city administration were conducted at least partially in Yiddish but Soviet Jews were still more inclined to move to one of the main cities in western Soviet Union, such as Minsk, Leningrad, Kyiv, Moscow or Odessa than to uproot themselves to the marshes of Birobidzhan. As the Soviet Union became a totalitarian state ruled by Stalin's iron fist in the late 1930s and purges swept the country the Party and the NKVD decimated the JAR's leadership and accused them of ideological heresies. The political climate discouraged people from expressing their Jewishness. The Kremlin's attitude toward Jews turned hostile and the regime became strict on Jewish settlements. In fact, less than 10 years after the creation of the *Jewish Autonomous Region, Stalin's regime destroyed the local Jewish culture.* Yiddish books were burnt; Jewish schools and the synagogue were closed down. Thousands of Jews were imprisoned and killed. The Kremlin dismantled the

[13] Only initially Judaism in the Jewish Region was entirely secular. It must be remembered that by 1927 23% of Soviet synagogues had been shut down and by 1939 there were very few synagogues left in the Soviet Union. (Lustiger, 2003, p. 51).

[14] During the early part of the 20th century, the Cossacks – ancient defenders of the Russian Empire, known for their military prowess – conducted vicious pogroms against Jews in the southwestern part of the Empire. After the Revolution, the last remnants of their autonomy disappeared.

agencies that handled Jewish resettlement, closed many social and cultural institutions in the region, and eliminated the Jewish *intelligentsia* while promoting the cultural assimilation of Jews. Since retaining Yiddish as an official language and maintaining the fiction that Birobidzhan embodied the national and cultural aspirations of Soviet Jewry, the Soviet regime stifled the emergence of Jewish culture and society.

Since the first days of the Second World War, the economy of the region shifted to war production. Even if not intentionally, for the third time[15] the region saved Jewish people from starvation and eventually from Nazi persecutions. However, the Soviet political class undermined and hindered the voluntary resettlement of Soviet Jews in the Far East, which revived briefly after the Second World War because of the chronic and constantly growing fear of Jewish nationalism, increasingly considered as potentially disloyal to Soviet power. Nevertheless, the three post-war years were the time of prosperity of the local Jewish culture and industrial building of the local civil society. Another wave of Jewish immigrants flooded the region.

During the Second World War, anti-Semitism was one reason for the increase in solidarity among Jewish people. Nazi aggression toward the Jews intensified national sentiment among them. This tragedy increased the interest of the world Jewry and even of many countries in the JAR as well.[16] Between 1946 and 1948, about 10,000 Jews moved to the JAR. In 1947 and 1948, twelve special trains brought approximately 6,500 Jewish settlers, primarily from Ukraine, to the JAR. By the end of 1948[17], when the State of Israel was established, 30,000 Jews were living in Birobidzhan. In the streets of the city, of many villages and settlements, Yiddish was as widespread as Russian. Soviet control over the area was relaxed. Jewish cultural life in the region flourished again and in 1947 a synagogue was opened, in which Jewish cultural and religious life was organised. During the last years of Stalin's life, however, the regime's anti-Semitism resurfaced, together with the fabricated *Doctors' plot* (1952), and manifested itself in the fight against the so-called "Jewish nationalist conspiracy." This shattered any further hope that Birobidzhan could develop into an authentic centre of Soviet Jewish life.

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[15] The first was the settlement as an escape from the Western part of the Soviet Union with its dramatic problems in the 1920s and the second happened at the time of *Holodomor*, the intentionally provoked famine in Ukraine (1932–1933), with approximately 7 million dying in tragic circumstances. See R. Conquest (1986), *The Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[16] The *Einigkeit*, the Yiddish newspaper published in Moscow, often referred on its pages to the desire of Jewish immigrants to take part in the future building of the JAR. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee played a major role in attracting the attention of government officials to the Birobidzhan Project (Emiot, 1981, pp. 2–3).

[17] The JAR reached its population peak in 1948.

The number of Jewish demands for expatriation documents to Israel increased and Stalin brutally changed the policy towards Jewish people inside the Soviet Union. All traces of the Jewish culture in the JAR were eliminated, with the only exception of the *Birobidzhaner Stern*, a newspaper written in Yiddish, and a radio programme, which were virtual translations of *Pravda*. Yiddish schools, theatres, and the synagogue were closed again. The practice of Judaism was discouraged and bureaucracy curtailed the teaching of Yiddish. The revival of the "Birobidzhan idea" ended with Stalin's second wave of purges, shortly before his death. Although Jewish people used to be almost the majority in the JAR, their numbers declined inexorably. In the ensuing years, the idea of an autonomous Jewish region in the Soviet Union was all but forgotten.[18] The 1959 census revealed 1,269 Jews in the JAR's population. Compared with 1939, the number of Jews in the JAR had decreased by almost a fifth.

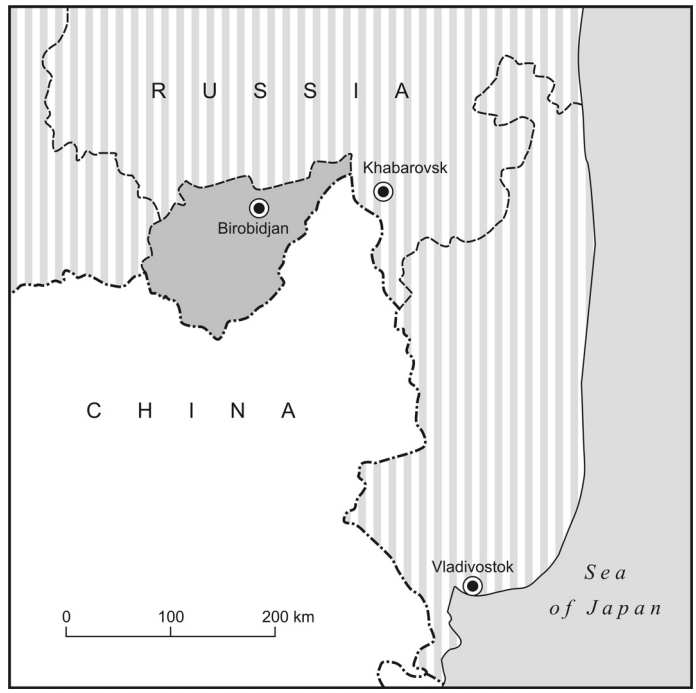

Fig. 2. The JAR in the Far East
Source: own work.

[18] Even those Jews who believed in the future Jewish Republic and contributed to the development of Birobidzhan, had been executed during the purges of the 1930s and the 1940s. The purges not only exterminated Jewish officials and intellectuals, but also erased many basic elements of the Jewish nationality and culture, leaving the inhabitants of the region bewildered and largely in the grips of encroaching terror.

4. THE JAR AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

Perestrojka unintentionally encouraged Jewish culture in Birobidzhan. By the time the USSR collapsed in 1991 and when Russia and Israel established diplomatic relations, most of the remaining Jewish population left for Israel and Germany.[19]

Nowadays, the remaining Jews officially are less than 3% of the inhabitants but it is uncertain how many Jews are living in the region. Yet the region retains its roots in everyday life. In fact, there has been a noticeable revival of Jewish life. Although young people have understandable problems with Yiddish, the language experienced a revival in public schools and is one of the official languages of the region. In all JAR schools where Jewish children and children of Gentiles live together, including Koreans and Chinese, young people study Jewish culture and literature, as well as the Yiddish language and Modern Hebrew. Interest in Judaism and the Yiddish language remains strong and even children of non-Jewish families are interested in studying them. This is also because many non-Jewish parents say that since they live in the JAR, they want their children to know about the global Jewish history, language, and culture. The Birobidzhan National University is unique in Russian Far East. The basis of the training course is the study of the Hebrew language, history, and classic Jewish texts. The *Birobidzhaner Stern* newspaper, one of the few of its kind in the world, has been published continuously since the early 1930s, though the Second World War interrupted its publication for several years (it was shut down by a decree), even if some efforts were made to "Russify" Yiddish culture and to eliminate it.[20] Today, only the central pages of the newspaper remain in Yiddish, but these are also considered a landmark of the region's culture. Yiddish radio and television programming continues. In the early 1990s, offices displayed plaques both in Russian and Yiddish everywhere. The culture in Yiddish is flourishing, attracting many Jews from all over the world. The JAR now hosts an *International Festival of Jewish culture*, an annual event held since 1988. In recent years, the ethnic and socio-cultural composition has changed significantly as some residents are now less afraid to admit their Jewish background, which has caused a rebirth of both Yiddish and modern Jewish cultures, also through the decision of major Jewish figures to return to the JAR from Israel (Vitale, 2005a, 2005b, 2007).

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[19] According to Iosef Brener, a local historian, 20,000 Jews left Birobidzhan in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, most for Israel. The JAR is still suffering from the effects of high Jewish emigration, especially in medicine.

[20] The most notable of these attempts was that to replace the Hebrew alphabet used for writing Yiddish with the Cyrillic alphabet. The Yiddish section of the *Birobidzhaner Stern* is edited today by Elena Sarashevskaja, who is not Jewish. She learned Yiddish and realised that this ancient language "Is not only a language, it is about Jewish history and literature, our culture."

Something unusual is happening: about 150–200 Jews move to Birobidzhan every year. The autonomy caused the building of regional and federal bodies of executive authority, although the centralising reforms adopted by the Kremlin in the 2000s and in 2020 have made regional autonomy only an appearance. Nevertheless, nowadays in the Region there are clear spontaneous cooperation and close relations between religions, schools, and institutions, which replaced interethnic tensions and conflicts. The cooperation is evident above all in the organisation of charitable actions and cultural events that aid the development of the religions and ethnic groups present in the region. Birobidzhan's children (Jews and non-Jews) study Jewish traditions together and this helps them cooperate because they recognise that they have a cultural substratum in common. It is certainly not surprising that the local youth has never known what anti-Semitism is. There is simply no reason or occasion to deal with this bias. They may discover it (with great surprise and frustration) only as they grow up, attend higher levels of education, and move to the western part of Russia. When they encounter it, it seems to them a very curious, "strange" and a quite incomprehensible phenomenon and some sort of a mental deformation or a psychological problem of the person who manifests and carries it. In fact, children grow up, play, and learn together in schools where Jewish culture is widespread. Despite Soviet persecutions, Jewish people and non-Jews have lived peacefully in the region for over sixty years. Therefore, this case study may be important for ethnic research beyond the case of the JAR and as an opportunity in developing policy strategies for managing ethnic conflicts, and cultural and religious diversities.

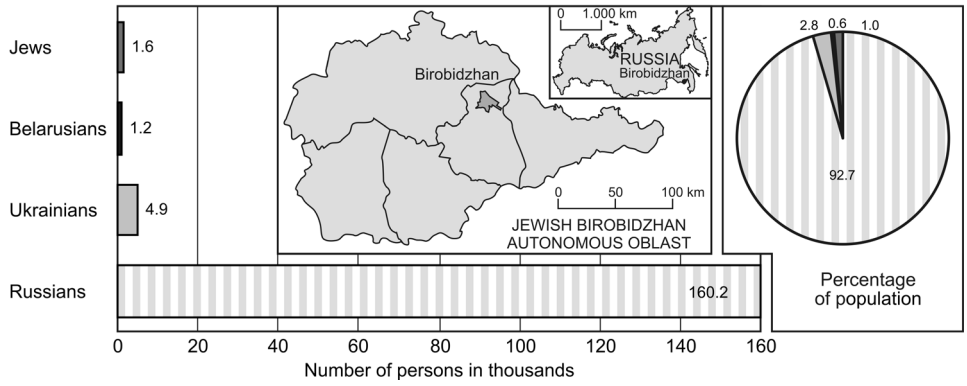

Fig. 3. Ethnic structure of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in 2010

Source: own work.

According to the 2010 Russian census, there were only 1,628, mostly older, Jews living in the region, out of a total population of approx. 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 adhered to the Russian Orthodox Church, 9% were unaffiliated generic Christians, 6% adhered to other orthodox churches. 0.2% of the population practiced Judaism. In addition, 35% of the population deemed itself to be "spiritual but not religious", 22% were atheist, and 5.2% followed other religions or did not give an answer to the question.

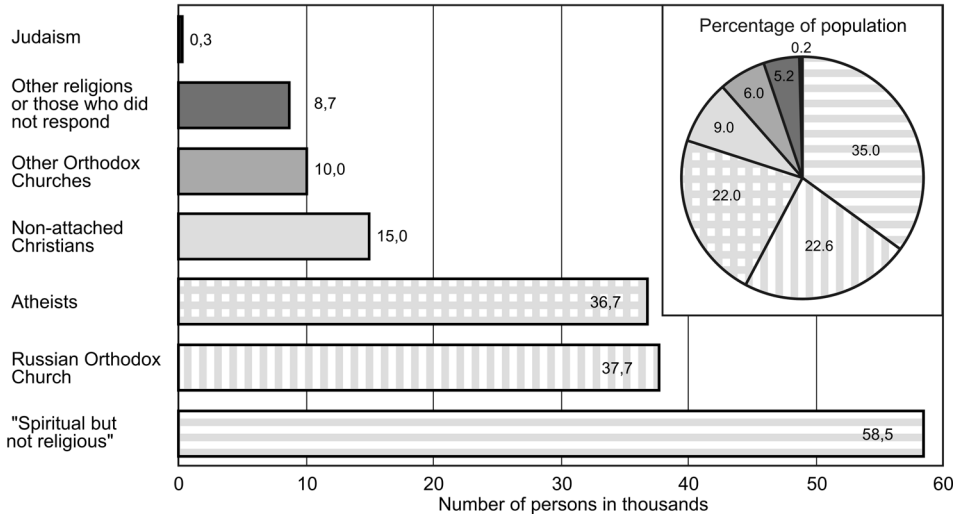

Fig. 4. Religious structure of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast in 2012

Source: own work.

The leading position among religions belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchy. Two Jewish communities are also active. The "*Frejd*" Birobidzhan Jewish religious community has existed for 24 years. The already close cooperation between the Orthodox parishes and the Birobidzhan Jewish cultural and religious communities (Orthodox parishes donated many financial contributions for the building of the synagogue), has expanded to include, a rather rare occurrence in the world, Muslims. This is a recent and very significant phenomenon. The immigration of Muslim people from Central Asia to the JAR has increased steadily since 2008. The most extraordinary thing is that the Jewish community has created optimal conditions for Muslims for their religious practices and activities, and conditions for effective cooperation in solving their daily problems. The coexistence with Muslims and mutual respect is today the most challenging and interesting development of the intercultural and interethnic relations in the JAR.

Nowadays, the inhabitants of the region believe that there is a real chance they could establish a thriving Jewish community 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 the return from Israel, has helped to create a rich soil for a Jewish future. Even if there is still great confusion between Birobidzhan's Yiddish heritage, which is both linguistic and cultural, and the Jewish practice that rabbis and foreign Jewish organisations are trying to encourage, the rebirth of the religious efforts in the region is quite remarkable. In 2003, a rabbi went to the region from Israel and the administration built a new Synagogue. Jewish people in the region have continued to mark Jewish holidays, and older people have recollected 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 descents) have discovered their Jewish roots and embraced them. Ten years ago, many of those who left did not want to proclaim themselves as Jewish. Nevertheless, people today define themselves using Jewish qualities and talk about how their grandmothers and great-grandmothers practiced the Jewish faith. In fact, the Jewish community in the region has a more solid base than it had in 1995 and a greater sense of permanence. Jewish children learn about their history and traditions in summer camps, together with other young Jews from around the world. The Jewish cultural revival is turning into an identity banner. The Jewish region has retained its identity despite emigration waves. Not everyone who moved to the Holy Land stayed in Israel forever (Vitale, 2005). Some Jews are moving from Israel to Birobidzhan today also because of an intense sense of estrangement in Palestine and longing back for Siberia's magnificent wildlife, for the sense of community and uniqueness that one experiences in Birobidzhan, and for the human and personal relationships typical of a remote Siberian region. These aspects are certainly not surprising or rare in the global Jewish culture. Eric Maroney's seminal work (Maroney, 2010) has demonstrated that since antiquity, the ability of Jews to craft homelands for themselves in regions far from their imagined point of origins has been an important, if overlooked, part of their history. In 2013 the Russian government has announced a plan to offer a n 8,000 dollar aid (including direct financial help, airline ticket, coverage of moving expenses, and health insurance) to many immigrants – who did not even have to be Russian nationals – who would be willing to relocate to the JAR.

On the economic side, peaceful coexistence between ethnic and religious groups has proven to be very influential. The JAR's economy, based on mining, agriculture, lumber extraction, and light manufacturing, is doing well also because of an intensive exchange with the Chinese living beyond the border on the Amur. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, cheap goods from China flooded the market, which has helped the local population to maintain an acceptable standard of living.

The JAR's gross regional product has reportedly increased by 50% since 2000. Its well-developed industrial and agricultural sectors and its rich resources of min-

erals and building materials are in great demand with the booming export of raw materials to China. Water is also abundant in the region, which is of great help to agriculture and animal breading. Cattle and poultry are bred on the rich grassland, and an abundance of nectar-producing plants creates favourable conditions for beekeeping (Srebrnik, 2006, p. 18).

Transportation has also always been very favourable for the region. The Amur river connects the JAR to the Pacific Ocean. The Trans-Siberian railway links the region with western Russia, East Asia, and the Pacific. Russia and China completed a rail bridge across the Amur linking Russia's JAR to China's Heilongjiang province, providing about 5.2 million tons of annual freight turnover capacity with further work elsewhere increasing that to about 20 million tons.

5. IDENTITY, COEXISTENCE AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE JAR

The most interesting characteristic and unique feature of the JAR are the formations and the consolidation of local identity of a regional kind that came directly from its history. As Milton J. Esman wrote: "Ethnic identity can be on a spectrum between primordial historic continuities and instrumental opportunistic adaptation." (Esman, 1994, p. 15). Even though the Jewish Autonomous Region was created in 1934 to control the Jewish component of the Soviet Union with apartheid, assimilation, and even possibly fusion (*slijane nacij*: the "fusion" of nationalities, as a deliberate project) of different ethnonational components, this process did not occur at all. 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 and take what was better one from another (and above all to form a common substratum of Jewish cultural inspiration) for generations. This appeared very clear as the Soviet period ended 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 descendants of the first Jewish settlers, has been of paramount importance in the building of their unique regional identity that became quite normal for the coexistence among people taking the characteristics of Jewish culture. The natural conditions and the need to solve common problems of a typical Siberian region have always stimulated cooperative behaviour. Hence, the integration that occurred in the Jewish Autonomous Region is very far from that elaborated by the theorists of the assimilation. The reality of today's coexistence is the opposite of the assimilation paradigm (according to the Sociological School of Chicago of the first half of the 20th century) which considers culture homogeneous: identifications have not disappeared or

have even become dimmer. There has not occurred an assumption of values, rules, and models of behaviour (seen as static and not changeable) by minorities gained from the majority group, resulting in the loss of their ethnic distinctive characters with the fusion of differences – a process that Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess considered inevitable (Park and Burgess, 1921). Particularly in this case, there is a powerful interest in the local Jewish cultural characteristics as globally unique heritage, as a common point of reference, and as a clear source of regional pride. Even mixed marriages could create neither an amalgam nor assimilation. They have stimulated cultural life and the enrichment of the Jewish culture of the region, shared as a common culture of which one can be proud. Rather, there has always been an awareness of the relevance of ethnic differences and the differences as a source of enrichment.

The most interesting feature is the non-existence of ethnic prejudices such as anti-Semitism, which in Russia has had a long and tragic history. In fact, the Jewish people of the region have been able to oppose assimilation seeking soft forms of ethnonational conscience not in contrast with multicultural coexistence but stimulating reciprocal imitation. As a result, there was a process of "approaching" (Bromley, 1979) and "adaptation." (Smith, 1984, p. 34). 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 (see, for example, Alba and Nee, 1997, pp. 826–874): culture, the basic element of a people, is seen as syncretism in permanent evolution, as a target of an amalgam of different influences. This is the reason why "natural assimilation" (Connor, 1994; Bari, 1995, p. 34), coming from cultural everyday interactions, did not occur. Reciprocal "acculturation" – typical in the conceptions of the 20th century (be it American or Soviet), and which is seen as a certain product of the succession of generations ("straight-line assimilation") – has become untrue in the JAR. What is more important, "reactive ethnicity", able to stimulate the "feeling of us" against the "other", has not formed.

Nowadays diversity management in the JAR is based on cultural (not only Jewish) institutions that follow an old tradition of spontaneous cooperation between different ethnic groups. Cultural innovative programs continuously promote diversity management and interethnic coexistence, based on a very interesting Jewish "local" and "regional patriotism", shared intensely by almost all the inhabitants of Birobidzhan and the region. In fact, the JAR lacks cultural exclusivism, uniformity, discrimination, and ethnocentrism, features typical of every kind of nationalism (Wehler, 2001), and self-isolation of ethnic minorities. The community has developed spontaneous forms of syncretism and of mutual comprehension among different ethnic groups (Nivat, 2013). The roots the inhabitants feel to share 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, and

of common history that has created many links between individuals and groups[21] among which Jews are considered the pioneers. This Siberian "territory of the frontier" has contributed to the development of strong ties with the earth and the other settlers; a sort of "local patriotism" or "communitarian *mythomoteur*" (Smith, 1992, p. 72) that constantly renews itself and which does not disappear (as reflected in direct testimonies) in the Jewish people who moved to Israel and who continue to be called in Palestine "the Birobidzhancy".

The "ethnic revival" of Jewish people (Rotschild, 1981) stimulates also children born in mixed 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 the distinctive characteristics of the different cultures inhabiting the region, despite not having known their own origins for so long. This has been amplified by the renaissance of an "active Jewish culture" (because of the religious renaissance) 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[22], has actually continued to stimulate the unique process of identity building.

Judaism in Birobidzhan takes a different physiognomy towards the exclusivity of blood (descendance from mother) and religion. Non-Jewish people mostly experience culture, a sort of integral way of life, a historically-based identity, as some scholars define it (Schnapper, 1980, p. 38) that does not stop the vision of current Hebraism. Thus, the local Hebraism has produced many forms of cultural patterns of reference which have created the basis for a culture rooted in Jewish characteristics, of which people are proud, shared by the inhabitants, which became the constituent myth of the local community, the source of identity, and "the culture of reference". As a result, territoriality means, in this case, the sheer process of personal and collective identity building and self-identification.

Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians who reached the region at different times and in several immigration waves considered the region their own and they often described their traditions as rooted in Jewish history and culture, viewing them as parts of their own history. Their interest in Jewish culture, habits, and the everyday way of life has been developing along with their interest in the Yiddish language. Although throughout the world many languages are endangered, Yiddish is experimenting with a consistent revival in the region. The Nazi tried to destroy *Yidishkayt* in Europe, but here it is still alive and throbbing.

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[21] Connor, 1994 (Bari, 1995, pp. 103–104 and 234).

[22] The Bolsheviks tried to build an atmosphere where Jewish culture would be a passive one. However, Jews were different from other ethnic groups (nations) in Russia because there was a religious identity tied to their cultural identity that could not be disabled. The aim of assimilation was eliminate religious identity. However, an artificially created void would need to be filled with something. A secular Yiddish culture with "a socialist base" seemed to be a friendly approach.

The Jewish people of the region do not consider themselves members of the world's Jewish Diaspora but think of the region simply as one of many "world's Hebraism twigs". They do not feel as the "curriers" of a "vicarious nationalism" (Smith, 1992, p. 314), referred to as other ethnonational fragments dispersed in different parts of the world.

6. THE JAR IN THE POST-SOVIET POLITICAL SYSTEM

Within an atmosphere of very heated debates about nationality, Jews struggled to find a place to call home after the Revolution, to secure a future for Yiddish as a specific culture and language: the territorialisation (the typical element of nationality advocated by Stalin) inspired support to Birobidzhan. Many scholars have defined the story of the JAR as a "failure"[23], "a sad and absurd history", "the concentrated tragic absurdity of Birobidzhan" (Gessen, 2016), and the region as "an exile more than a home", "an exotic attraction" (Maksimowska, 2018), "a utopia", "a Jewish Disneyland" "a parody of the world history of the Jewish people", "a caricature of Israel", "the false Zion", "the unfulfilled dream of a Jewish homeland" (Stolberg, 1999b), "a relic of a failed Soviet project" "the failed experiment of a failed system", and so on. But is that correct?

The main problem of the post-Soviet political system is that the potential offered by cooperation and coexistence have continued to be hindered by the difficulties with a steady protection of minorities – even though they do not have the typical problems of minorities – through constitutional tools (federalism and stable self-rule) (Schlesinger, 1970[2]; Smith, 1986; Vitale, 1999; Wehler, 2001), and the difficulty to protect the region from strong interferences continuously raised by the over-centralised power, which could always threaten the fragile and unique balance between ethnic groups peacefully living in the JAR. A possible "imbalance" stimulated by the political centralisation and its obsessive planning could today encourage even a new emigration of Jewish people to Israel. The political system of post-Soviet Russia does not offer guarantees for the development of spontaneous diversity management in the region, and for keeping pluralism and coexistence, especially considering the current revival of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and discrimination of a different kind in the European part of Russia, which is tolerated by the government. Moreover, the reform of the federal structure deprived Russian regions not only of a part of their political autonomy but also of their economic resources. Since then, the regions have delivered an increasing

[23] "The mass departure from the JAR, once conceived as the Soviet/Russian Jewish homeland, made the failure of the entire project particularly evident," (Estraikh, 2019, p. 69). Already Stalin and Khrushev declared the JAR of Birobidzhan "a failure".

share of their tax revenues to Moscow, which has continued to deplete its funds. As a result, the Russian system became an increasingly "apparent federal system", a Soviet-type of "*façade federalism*" that can revoke at any time the status of autonomy and impose harsh conditions, which could destroy this balance of spontaneously self-formed relations. "Cosmetic autonomies" (see Nosov, 1996, p. 208) are only a mirror of a hierarchic vertical system, one which is federal only in appearance[24]: a sort of *fédéralisme inauthenthique* (Beaud, 1996, p. 42), *de facto* aborted and based on the dependency relation between the centre and the peripheries (Sharlet, 1994, p. 125). This system lacks intergovernmental relations as in other federations and parity between "federal subjects" and its centralised government. Not surprisingly, typically the JAR has many problems with its financial independence.

Russia's political structure is still based on the national/territorial principle (the recognition – of Soviet origin – of nationality as "the owner" of the territory) in the definition of the administrative rule of republics and regions: the most threatening factor for a federal system.[25] This condition is more and more likely to generate additional problems among local minorities. When the principle of ethnic homogeneity remains the basis of the constituent unities of a federation, this increases the force of external attraction which can cause internal interethnic conflicts.[26] Federalism and self-rule – as shown by the Yugoslav and Soviet collapses – work well only in the absence of ethnic homogeneous federate entities. Jewish people have never constituted a majority in the region yet in fact it remains Jewish in terms of its culture. This made it harder for the Jewish national and cultural institutions to dominate the region (Goldberg, 1961, p. 226), even if it is truly remarkable how much *yidishkayt*, in all of its variety, can endure, and Russian political class' efforts seemed more designed to cripple a nascent civil society rather than to help it mature and grow (Taylor, 2011, p. 204).

All the best characteristics of the JAR are developing under the most unfavourable political and administrative conditions. Increasing centralisation (especially after the constitutional reform of August 2020) makes the centre vs. periphery relations tense and unstable. Similarly, the hierarchic administrative structure and the lack of governmental, independent responsibilities in the regional sphere remain impactful

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[24] See Bassani, Stewart, Vitale, 1995. On the formal federal structure of Russia, redesigned by centralisation of Eltsin in 1993, see Sharlet, 1994, pp. 115–127, and *La Costituzione della Federazione Russa*, Milan, 1994; introd., transl. and ed. by A. Vitale.

[25] Elazar, 1987 (Milan, 1995, p. 194). Ethnic nationalism is the most egocentric (and irreducible) form of nationalism, the most complicated base on which one can build a system of constitutional power-sharing (a functioning and peaceful federal system). Language, religion, national myths, and so on tend to divide people sharply and to create the most difficult conditions for maintaining the unstable balances typical of a federal system.

[26] External pressures on ethnic not satisfied minorities can very easily produce interethnic conflicts. (Duchacek, 1987, p. 288).

and the dependency on centralised decisions can aggravate several problems in the delicate system of interethnic relations in the JAR. In fact, the centralised government could always intervene in linguistic, cultural, and religious policies altering the balance given by the original and unique coexistence characterised by a special "regional patriotism", based on a deep sense of cultural affinity.

The JAR depends on the decision-making process of the centralised government, that constantly threatens self-governing groups, and risks crippling the activity of the independent organisations of the local civil society, which is essential for the renaissance of the region. Only an authentic federal system based on the shared rule, self-rule, and limited rule could preserve and merge the amazing spontaneous formation of the interethnic coexistence inside the region. As Antony D. Smith wrote: "The federal solutions help to minimize the ethnic antagonisms and to assure the political recognition to territorialist entities and cultures." (Smith, 1992, p. 547). The Birobidzhan project may still have relevance today as an example of unexpected consequences of a national planned system, which has produced spontaneous ethnic coexistence, and even a sort of "local, geographic patriotism", despite its location within a permanently dangerous, over-centralised political system that leaves nothing to self-government. However, the problem is that only the evolution of the JAR towards self-rule within an authentic federal system could protect the region from the continuing threats caused by centralised power decisions, which are potentially dangerous for the delicate interethnic relations management and coexistence.

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