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A "zoo" and "mock-up": On the most frequent ways of portraying Birobidzhan

In 1928 Soviet authorities decided to "designate the Birobidzhan area as a region of resettlement for working Jews" (Patek, 1997). In line with the Soviet ethnic policy – the "ordering" of peoples according to the ethno-territorial map drawn up in Moscow – Jews could be recognised as a nation on condition of their collective association with a particular administrative unit. The policy of transformation of the social structure of the USSR, in turn, required that members of the Jewish population should abandon their "socially useless" occupations and become industrial and agricultural (kolkhoz) workers instead. The purpose of building a secular, Yiddish-speaking culture that would be "national in form and socialist in content"[1] was to be served by the institutions of the planned Jewish autonomous territory. What tipped the decision in favour of this remote geographical location (over five thousand miles from Moscow) was not only its natural resources but also the need to consolidate the Soviet presence on the eastern outskirts of the state. On 7 May 1934, the Birobidzhan National District (*raion*) was officially declared the Jewish Autonomous Region (*oblast*).

The progress of settlement was slow; severe climate and lacking infrastructure made not only work but also life in the region exceedingly difficult. Jews have never become the majority in Birobidzhan – the highest proportion of the Jewish population (30 per cent)

[1] In 1925, Stalin wrote: "Proletarian culture does not abolish national culture, it gives it content. On the other hand, national culture does not abolish proletarian culture, it gives it form" (Stalin, 1954, p. 140).

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was recorded after the Second World War, when the region received between eight and ten thousand newcomers, mainly survivors of the Holocaust. During the anti-Jewish purge of the so-called "black years" (1948–1953), all Jewish institutions were closed and Yiddish was pushed out of the public sphere altogether. What followed was the first wave of emigration from Birobidzhan to other regions of Russia (e.g. nearby Khabarovsk). Between 1959 and 1970 the decline of the Jewish population in the region was proportionally four times higher than that recorded for Soviet Jewry in general. As in the rest of the Soviet Union, the 1980s saw a wave of emigration abroad, mainly to Israel and the United States (Patek, 1997). The Jewish Autonomous Region and Northern Caucasus recorded the highest level of Jewish emigration in the entire post-Soviet area (Tolts, 2003). Today, the region (in its original borders) is part of the Russian Federation; Jews make up about one per cent of the population (according to the 2010 national census, the total population of the region is 176,558, with those declaring themselves as Jewish counting 1,628).

For many years, the Jewish Autonomous Region has mainly been known as a kind of "anti-utopian scarecrow" of the Cold War period.[2] It was not so much the reality of Jewish life in the Far East (hardly known on the other side of the Iron Curtain), as the propaganda vision of a socialist Jewish homeland in the USSR that fuelled the imagination of those who viewed Birobidzhan as a spectacular failure. 2018 marks the ninetieth anniversary of Jewish settlement in the Russian Far East. Today, Birobidzhan is a popular stopover for journalists and non-fiction writers, mainly because it is located on the Trans-Siberian Railway route, whose appeal as a tourist attraction cannot be underestimated.

Visitors

When I visited the office of the newspaper *Birobidzhaner Shtern* (Birobidzhan Star) in the early autumn of 2008, I received a rather nervous welcome from the editors of the "Jewish life" column. Explaining they were fed up with how journalists presented their town, they used the words "mock-up" and "zoo". As it turned out, they had recently been visited by a reporter from the neighbouring Amur region who based his unfavourable article about their col-

[2] The image of Birobidzhan plays a function similar to that of Nowa Huta, analysed by Ewa Majewska (Majewska, 2009). After 1989, the image of this new industrial city built on the outskirts of Cracow (Poland) became "a kind of embodiment of the 'ban on utopias', (…) a symbol of the failure of the social engineering of real socialism, and (…) a tool for discouraging any attempts at alternative or utopian thinking" (Majewska, 2009, pp. 363–364).

umn on his own prejudice rather than facts. Lena Sarashevskaia, a Russian, was upset by his remark that she had married a Jew because she was interested in Yiddish and wanted to write for the *Birobidzhaner Shtern*. Riva Shmain, a Jew, in turn, hardly spoke to me at all, as she was afraid I might comment on her pronunciation. She had talked to the journalist after having a couple of her teeth extracted, and in the article he wrote about her "typically Jewish" accent.

There have also been other stories of unpleasant encounters with visitors. According to one of them, when Yale Strom shot his documentary *L'Chayim, Comrade Stalin!*, he made a habit of storming into the office and filming those present without their consent. Also, he never returned some music records brought by the first settlers, which he had borrowed from the museum of one of the oldest Jewish kolkhoz farms in the region. Aleksandr Gutman, in turn, did not care much about the health or well-being of his protagonists – Boris and Masha Rak from the settlement of Valdheym – when he shot a documentary about their life (*In Search of Happiness*). "He exhausted Boris", said Lena Sarashevskaia, "Boris was ill in bed and had injections, and Gutman asked him to sit and listen to the Pathephone. And it even wasn't his! He didn't like the kind of music shown in the film at all". The documentary also includes scenes from Boris Rak's funeral. Walking among the mourners with his camera, Gutman allegedly ruined the atmosphere of the event. On one occasion, when he filmed Masha working in the museum he asked her to lean against a bust of one of the leaders of the Soviet Revolution and close her eyes. She was really upset about the scene, as she thought it gave an impression that she slept at work.

As can be seen, both informants are very sensitive to objectification on the part of external observers. Their complaints about "reporters" seem to stress that Birobidzhan is a reality and not a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994). However, the sad fact is that the town mainly functions as a "virtual" substitute of what actually exists, a stereotypical image, a map that is always more interesting than the territory. External observers writing about Birobidzhan treat it in terms of a sign of reality, a mere figure of speech, a "Birobidzhan", a chain of mutually interdependent mocking representations divorced from actual reality.

The zoo metaphor is possibly grounded in the fear of racist representations, as local residents have often experienced anti-Jewish verbal violence. People from other parts of the Soviet Union sometimes referred to Birobidzhan as an "exotic" attraction populated by a strange ethnic group. One of my informants recalled how her student friend had

explained why she wanted to come over: "Lena, I'll visit you in Birobidzhan to have a look at the Jews". In another example, a local resident was casually asked about her life "among those Jews" at an evening dance while on holiday in Vladivostok. What is more, members of other ethnic groups were not only interested in the appearance of local Jews but also expected to see some physical anomalies.[3] This feeling of being treated as "an interesting species" can be compared to the experience of the colonised, who – as observed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* – are characterised using "zoological terms" by the colonist (Fanon, 2004, p. 7).

In this article, I focus on descriptions of Birobidzhan by authors visiting the region in the hope of collecting sensationalist material for their books or articles. The texts in question share two important features: they often present Birobidzhan as a caricature of Israel and tend to be based on the contrast between its "official" as opposed to "genuine" Jewishness, with the former indicated by the name and the latter allegedly lacking altogether.

Red Zion

Witty phrases stressing the contrast between Birobidzhan and the "real" Zion rely on the use of a few modifiers, most of which make reference to the Soviet Union, communism or the remote location of the region. Michał Książek (2010) comments on the works by the local artist Vladislav Tsap, illustrating Sholem Aleichem's stories: "in his paintings the Birobidzhan Hasids keep praying, singing and being happy about their new Zion in the taiga" (Książek, 2010). Different types of (mostly popular) texts sometimes refer to the Jewish Autonomous Region as "the proletarian Zion",[4] "Red Zion" (Meilakhs, 2005), "the workers' Zion" (Książek, 2010), "that other promised land" (Thubron, 2001), "the socialist anti-Israel" (Chernenko, 2001), "the other Palestine" (Rzewuski, 2014), "the Jewish paradise" (Książek, 2010), or "the new Palestine" (JutkiewiczKubiak, 2001).

In most cases, the idea of the Birobidzhan project as Zion is portrayed as ridiculous, and such presentations stress the supposedly inherent contradiction of the idea of a Jewish autonomy in the Soviet Far East. In the book-length account of his journey across Siberia,

[3] Some informants recall people who imagined Birobidzhan residents as strikingly different from other Soviet citizens, or even thought that "Jews have horns".

[4] Paweł Smoleński, a note about the photography exhibition *Birobidżan* (Birobidzhan) by Michał Sadowski and Paweł Grześ, Galeria Krynki, November 2016 (mby, 2016).

Colin Thubron writes that "here, in this land of persecuted and sheltering minorities, there had grown the bizarre dream of a Jewish homeland. What happened was grotesque" (Thubron, 2001, p. 217). Indeed, some authors describing the early days of the region make use of the grotesque. In his article for *Haaretz*, Ilan Goren (2013) stresses those features of the project which his Israeli readers would find completely at odds with the fundamental Zionist principles. As a result, there is little doubt that at no point could the "Birobidzhan project" have been a serious alternative to Jewish settlement in Palestine. Rather, it appears as a caricature, an imperfect ersatz of Zionism. The author comments on the 1930s plans as follows: "There they would establish cooperative farms, raise pigs on kolkhozes and become experts in agriculture. At the same time a dual problem of identity would be solved: Judaism would no longer constitute a nuisance for Soviet atheism, and Zionism would not interfere with communism" (Goren, 2013).

The temptation to portray the Jewish Autonomous Region as a caricature of Israel is also apparent in an article by Michał Książek (2010). The use of titles of the books of the Bible and important events in Jewish history as headings in the text (Genesis, Exodus, The Promised Land, Back in Egypt, The Plagues, The Destruction of the Temple) creates the impression that the history of Jews in Birobidzhan was a parody of the sacred history of the people of Israel. The paradoxical nature of the Birobidzhan project is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the stereotypical image of the "Jew" and the "communist", as if the term "Jew-communist" could only function in the context of jokes: "They were told it would be the workers' Zion, the Jewish paradise, and so the people of Israel set out on their journey to the promised land again. (…) They were supposed to become kolkhoz workers, break marble in the quarries and forget about Jehovah". Some fragments of the article resemble the tone of famous Birobidzhan jokes: "Except a few Cossacks and Nanais, the swamps and marshes along the Amur between the rivers Bira and Bidzhan were an empty wilderness. And Stalin said, with a Georgian accent: 'Birobidzhan'. And he ordered to resettle there the Jews of Bolshevik Russia" (Książek, 2010).

According to what can be read in popular articles, the foundation and early days of the Jewish Autonomous Region could be summed up by the title of a book by David Vaĭserman (1999): Birobidzhan: Dreams and Tragedy (*Birobidzhan: Mechty i tragediia*). While most authors try to come to terms with "dreams", Jacek Hugo-Bader seems to content himself with "tragedy". In his non-fiction feature entitled "But revolution was supposed to be a pleasure" ("A rewolucja to przecież miała być przyjemność"; Hugo-Bader, 2010),

he interprets the story of Birobidzhan in terms of the agency of the Stalinist apparatus, with Jews as the passive victims of the historical process ("Soviet power tried to find a place for Jews"). On the one hand, he ironically evokes Soviet ethnic discourse: "Jews do not fit in any social class"; on the other, he adopts a similar essentialist perspective writing about the progress of settlement: "Jews are a southern people, urban folk, but still, they went" (Hugo-Bader, 2010, p. 96).

Some authors go even further: not only do they believe that Birobidzhan was Stalin's doing against the nature and will of the Jewish people, but also see it as a purposeful extermination project. In this context, the best-known observation is one made by Ilia Erenburg, suggesting that Birobidzhan was "a new ghetto" (Emiot, 1981, p. 4). Hugo-Bader writes that "like the Far East, the Jewish Autonomous Region was another island in the Gulag Archipelago" (Hugo-Bader, 2010, p. 103). According to Miron Chernenko, in turn, the project had all the markings of "the Soviet-style final solution of the Jewish question" (Chernenko, 2001).

Most likely, the use of the word "Zion" aims not only to discredit Birobidzhan but also stress that a truly Jewish homeland is somewhere else. In his "75 years on, Jews in Russia's Jewish autonomous district hold on" Grant Slater writes: "But many left the district after the verdant promises of Soviet propaganda yielded to the reality of harsh winters and swampy terrain. Still others left when a more hospitable Jewish homeland came into existence: Israel" (Slater, 2009). Sue Fishkoff (2004) argues that in spite of certain similarities between the Zionist and Soviet propaganda (e.g. the use of "posters showing muscular Jewish pioneers"), the situation of kibbutzniks and Jewish kolkhozniks in Birobidzhan was strikingly different, since the hardship they suffered as settlers involved different stakes: while those in Palestine fought for their Jewish homeland, those in the Far Eastern colony established by the Soviet dictator fought for survival. Eva-Maria Stolberg (1999) pinpoints this as follows: "Red Zion (…) became a propaganda bluff aiming to pull the wool over the eyes of the international Zionist movement and international Jewry". It is also today that narrations about the two places are strikingly different: while Israel is beautiful, Birobidzhan is its opposite. Indeed, reading a number of articles one gets an impression that the mass Jewish emigration of the 1990s was more of a flight from the "fake" to the "real" Zion than an attempt to improve the quality of life. Thubron recalls one of his conversations in Birobidzhan as follows: "I tried to describe to him the glittering clarity of the land, so alien from here, the sound of the sea he had never heard, the bitter beauty of Jerusalem, while his lips quivered in their beard, and his fingers noted points to remember" (Thubron, 2001, p. 221).

Utopia

Most texts on Birobidzhan include the motif of an "unaccomplished project" or "utopia". What can be noticed here is that different authors make different assumptions. Some view the project of a secular Jewish homeland in the USSR as a well-intentioned venture which resulted in failure. Thubron poetically captures this as follows: "That vision had died away into the ice, the concrete, the unsanctified spaces" (Thubron, 2001, p. 219). Colin McMahon (2001), in turn, succinctly sums up: "What seemed Utopian proved Orwellian". In this sense "utopia" is something that reaches beyond the existing reality in a positive sense, but at the same time something impossible to fulfil, since all attempts to make it come true inevitably involve its distortion. On the other hand, others view the very idea of the project as mistaken. In this case, then, its "utopian" nature makes it irrational and invalid as such. This assumption is apparent in the use of the phrase Red Zion as an oxymoron: it cannot be taken at face value in the context of the successful settlement project in Eretz Israel.

Consequently, the word utopia is often used in two different senses. For example, in the title of a Sukkot meeting organised by the Professor Moses Schorr Foundation in Warsaw (6 October 2012), "utopia" appears in conjunction with a mocking appellation for Stalin: "Birobidzhan: A drunk confectioner's utopia: a report from a journey" ("Birobidżan: utopia pijanego cukiernika – raport z podróży"). In the 1950s, Warsaw residents called Stalin "a drunk confectioner", a nickname occasioned by the shape of the Palace of Culture, a massive structure resembling a gigantic wedding cake, built by the Soviets in the heart of the Polish capital. An information note about the meeting refers to Birobidzhan as "a substitute for a secular Jewish state" and "a punch against the State of Israel" ("Birobidżan: utopia pijanego cukiernika – raport z podróży", 2012).

The concept of utopia also appears in Aleksandra Zywert's review of *Red Zion* (*Czerwony Syjon*, 2007, the Polish edition of *Krasnyĭ sion*, 2005), a novel by the acclaimed Petersburg writer Aleksandr Melikhov (Meilakhs, 2005),[5] which tells the story of Bentsion Shamir. As a young boy, he and his family flee from the German invasion of Poland to find refuge in the Soviet Union. While the first part is devoted to their tragic fate under the Soviets, the second one

[5] The original Russian edition of the novel (*Krasnyĭ sion*, 2005) was published under the author's surname: Meilakhs; the Polish translation (*Czerwony Syjon*, 2007) – under his pseudonym: Melikhov (transliterated into Polish as Mielichow), used in all previous literary works by the author. While the pseudonym Melikhov appears in the text of this article, references to *Krasnyĭ sion* are made using the surname Meilakhs (translator's note).

is set today. Bentsion is a respected Israeli writer, who, in spite of his professional success, feels he has lost his sense of purpose. Searching for an answer to his problem, he recalls the idea of a Jewish homeland in Birobidzhan, with which he became familiar in his childhood, when he talked to his neighbour, Berl, in his Polish hometown of Biłgoraj. Bentsion decides to confront the idea preserved in his memory with reality and goes east, where "the fairy-tale Birobidzhan (…) turned out to be just another Soviet shithole (*obychnyĭ sovetskiĭ Leninokhrensk*), with the banal ordinariness of the place only stressed by the mighty volcanic hills" (Meilakhs, 2005, p. 145). Melikhov's view, apparent also in his other works, is that people's actions are driven by "fairy tales", illusions which are impossible to accomplish, but which people are ready to die for. In his *Birobidzhan: A Promised Land* (*Birobidzhan – Zemlia obetovannaia*, 2009), a kind of commentary on *Red Zion*, Melikhov (2009) examines the Soviet ethnic policy, the driving force behind the Birobidzhan project. He argues, however, that if it had not been for a "collective dream", "the fairy-tale of Birobidzhan" created by poets, the project would never have happened. This makes its failure even more painful, as it involved not only an economic and political, but also, most importantly, spiritual collapse.

Aleksandra Zywert (2008) decided to entitle her review of *Red Zion* "The Birobidzhan utopia" ("Birobidżańska utopia"). Drawing on Honorata Cyrzan, she defines utopia as a project of "a perfect community", or "something better than what has been the case so far". Following Leszek Kołakowski, she views utopian thinking as a belief that the ultimate ideal is attainable. She argues that the principal theme of Melikhov's novel is the utopian nature of the Birobidzhan project, a "fairy tale" which has an impact on what people decide to do. Zywert writes: "Birobidzhan was a land created practically out of nothing, a pure illusion crammed into people's heads using tried and tested propaganda tricks, mainly in the press". Like Melikhov, she thinks that "for their own good, people should be aware of their weaknesses, including probably the greatest – hence the most dangerous – of them all: their inclination to uncritically follow utopian visions".

In the two above examples, then, Birobidzhan appears as "pure illusion" which is not grounded in reality, a "substitute" for the true state of Israel. This makes it the case of utopia understood as an irrational and unreasonable idea. The authors of other popular texts, in turn, tend to focus on the first understanding of utopia: a plan that failed, an idea that became distorted in the process of its implementation. For example, Grant Slater (2009) refers to Birobidzhan as "a relic of a misguided Soviet plan to resettle Jews in the far east of Russia", and Simon Winchester (2000) quotes one of his informants: "The experiment was

a good one. But it failed. There is no synagogue here. No rabbi. The only Torah scrolls are in the museum. We have to accept that this is no longer a Zion. The idea that this is a Jewish Autonomous Region is outdated now".

Paradoxically, these two understandings of utopia can appear in conjunction, as is the case of a text by Katarzyna Jutkiewicz-Kubiak (2001), where we read that the unreasonable nature of the project of Jewish settlement in the Russian Far East resulted in its faulty implementation: "The project of creating a Jewish state in the Far East resulted in utter failure. It was hardly reasonable to expect that an artificial entity implementing a policy that was in fact contrary to the interests of those for whom it was established would become an attractive destination for prospective settlers" (Jutkiewicz-Kubiak, 2001, p. 5).

The word "utopia" is often used interchangeably with "experiment", which intensifies the reader's feeling that Birobidzhan's Jewishness is artificial, created in a controlled environment under the supervision of those who initiated the project. Ilan Goren (2013) quotes the filmmaker Yair Kedar, who makes the following comment: "Birobidzhan is like a Jewish ghost town, and it reminded me of abandoned Ukrainian shtetls. But here it's not a matter of generations of Jewish history in the Pale of Settlement, but a modern, daring and somewhat strange social experiment" (Goren, 2013). It is worth noting that in this approach Birobidzhan is a synecdoche of the entire Soviet project as such. Katarzyna Jutkiewicz-Kubiak (2001) argues that the story of the Autonomous Jewish Region reflected the current political situation in the USSR. Simon Winchester (2000) observes that Birobidzhan "is the site of one of Stalin's great follies, and one of the more bizarre remnants of the Soviet order". Colin McMahon (2001), in turn, concludes that "the best that can be said is that it was a failed experiment by a failed system".

Discussing how the Jewish Autonomous Region is associated with utopia, it is worth referring to Zygmunt Bauman's criticism of approaching the concept as a pipe dream, a false idea or an unrealistic project (Bauman, 1976). Both understandings of the word "utopia" presented above fall under its negative definition as "outopia" (a place that does not exist). The authors of texts mentioned here certainly do not take an approach which views utopia in terms of "eutopia" (a place to be desired) and appreciates its emancipatory nature and its function as a tool for criticising the existing reality and dominant ideology. Bauman argues that abandoning utopia (understood as "eutopia") preserves the existing social order. None of the texts considered here includes a suggestion that the failure of the Birobidzhan project might have been brought about by abandoning its utopian potential rather than by the conditions produced by utopian thinking.

A Jewish Disneyland

Non-fiction features on Birobidzhan tend to include suggestions that its Jewishness is only decoration, and that the region itself is a Potemkin village. Indeed, most authors mainly focus on the elements of the urban landscape which manifest links with Jewish culture, such as the sign "Birobidzhan" in Yiddish welcoming passengers arriving by train, the big menorah in front of the railway station, the Jewish community centre, the new synagogue with illuminated Stars of David, and a number of statues around the town, including the Fiddler on the Roof, a rabbi blowing the shofar, a Jewish accordion player and Sholem Aleichem. This "decoration", again, evokes the idea of the simulacrum, a model superimposed on reality, which produces a temptation to "see what is underneath".

It may be for this reason that the texts considered here often display an attitude of suspicion. Michał Książek writes that the "Jewish elements" of Birobidzhan's urban landscape "do not leave any doubt that you have arrived in a Jewish town. But even if your ears got swollen making an effort to listen, you could not hear a word of Yiddish. What happened to the Jews?" (Książek, 2010). Using the biblical style, the author plays with the principle of decorum. His ironic expectation of encountering Jewishness in a non-Jewish reality is based on the code of signs found in the urban space. However, both the author and the reader are aware that nothing of the sort is going to happen, since Birobidzhan does not fit in any generally accepted pattern of Jewishness. Looking for "the Jews that aren't" is a game played by an ironic journalist: "The street going from the menorah-shaped fountain to the centre is not King David or Salomon Street, not even Bork Nokhem Street, but Oktiabrskaia, October Street. People in kippahs are nowhere to be seen. You can only glimpse the silver shine of a statue of a Jewish accordion player among the trees behind 'Tsimmes' shop. The first street across Oktiabrskaia is not named after Levites or the Lion of Judah, but after Lenin" (Książek, 2010).

However, the combination of "Jewish decoration" and "post-Soviet emptiness" is not always ironic, as it sometimes turns into a nostalgic cry for "real" Jewishness which is now gone. At a meeting with his readers, held at the 10th Festival of Jewish Art and Culture in Birobidzhan (2009), Aleksandr Melikhov made the following comment on the current situation: "Today we live in the past, like Indians in America, who are practically gone already; what's left is place names and symbols". It is worth noting that the writer nearly quoted the narrator of his *Red Zion*, Bentsion Shamir, who remarks: "Jews in Birobidzhan played the same role as

Indians in America: the exoticism of those who have perished" (Meilakhs, 2005, p. 146).[6] This orientalising comment from Melikhov creates colonial distance and objectifies those who still live in Birobidzhan. It also echoes Baudrillard's reflection on the hibernated reality of otherness – the case of members of an uncontacted tribe, whom anthropologists decide not to study at all. In this way, they are "lost to science" but preserved intact for ever. The criticised "virtual Jewish world"[7] of Birobidzhan decoration is at least as artificial as the outsiders' image of "real Jews", who supposedly should be there but in fact do not exist.

Melikhov's nostalgic attitude is also examined by Harriet Murav (2012). Unlike Aleksandra Zywert, however, she does not uncritically share his interpretation of Birobidzhan as an outcome of a certain illusion (utopia), but deconstructs it in terms of post-communist nostalgia. In doing so, she relies on Svetlana Boym's distinction between reflective nostalgia, the fragmentary experience of disintegrating reality that is no longer explained by a grand narrative, and restorative nostalgia, where the point of reference in the past is identified as the "ideal world", whose sudden departure results in psychological tension. Murav makes an interesting comparison between the two types of nostalgia on the one hand, and two types of aphatic disorders identified by Roman Jakobson on the other. She argues that reflective nostalgia is related to "contiguity disorder", in which the speaker is unable to make logical connections between verbal units and produces unorganised "word-heaps", and restorative nostalgia – to "similarity disorder", in which the speaker has a sense of a link between units but fails to associate a signifier with a particular signified and tends to substitute it with another one. Indeed, restorative nostalgia is characterised by persistent return to chains of signifiers stored in memory, which, however, have no clear connection with a particular signified. In *Red Zion* we encounter a nostalgic belief in the existence of "a socialist Jewish homeland", an ideal place one wants to return to but cannot. Persistently returning to the Birobidzhan theme, Melikhov approaches it in terms of a utopian (in the negative sense) "fairy tale", an empty signifier without a signified (Murav, 2012).

Lack of authenticity is a feature attributed not only to the "Jewish Disneyland",[8] but also to the activity of both the local administration and representatives of the local Jewish

[6] Translated by Harriet Murav (Murav, 2012, p. 222) (translator's note).

[7] The concept of "virtual Jewish world" was introduced by Ruth Ellen Gruber with reference to the practice of creating Jewish culture in Europe after the Holocaust by non-Jews (Gruber, 2002).

[8] Grant Slater (2009) writes: "Statues of Jewish violinists and accordion players dot the city. A golden menorah presides over the fountain in front of the train station, and Tevya from *Fiddler on the Roof* is frozen in bronze on his nearby haywagon – a Jewish Disneyland". In his article for *The New York Times*, David M. Herszenhorn (2012) writes: "While the big menorah standing outside the railroad station, the Yiddish street signs and ubiquitous Stars of David give Birobidzhan the veneer of a Jewish Disneyland, the city often seems to have the religious authenticity of a pizza bagel with pepperoni".

community. Writing about religiosity, Slater observes that "at times there is a sense that the veneer of Judaism in Birobidzhan is no thicker than the fresh coat of paint applied city-wide for the anniversary festivities" (Slater, 2009). McMahon, in turn, suggests that regional officials use Jewishness as "a way to set their poor and otherwise nondescript region off from the other 88 regions scrambling for money and attention for Moscow" (McMahon, 2001).

Exoticisation

Before my visit to Birobidzhan, I heard one of the jokes about the place: "The First Secretary of the Communist Party flies to visit the Jewish Autonomous Region. By mistake, his plane lands in China. The Secretary gets off, looks at the Chinese delegation who arrived to give him a welcome and asks: 'And why do you, Jews, squint like that?'" The joke relies on stereotypes combining the constructs of "nation" and "race" with physical appearance. It also involves the exoticisation of Birobidzhan, evokes its apparent insignificance in Soviet politics, and makes use of the topos of "mistake", recurrent at a number of different levels: the plane lands in China "by mistake" and the secretary "mistakes" the Chinese for Jews; the Autonomous District – located in a remote, unknown, "mistake-prone" area – might also be a "mistake".

Indeed, the location of the region is the subject of ironic comments in non-fiction writings. Thubron notes: "Nowhere seemed farther from that other promised land" (Thubron, 2001, p. 219). Goren, in turn, quotes Yair Kedar (a filmmaker and former editor of a travel magazine), who observes: "It reminded me of an Eastern European [sic!] version of the Wild West. Like a huge nature preserve, full of mosquitoes, dotted with small communities, lacking in infrastructure and inhabitants", adding that this sort of place could only be an attraction for young adventurers (Goren, 2013).

In his pursuit of adventure and the elusive "essence of Jewishness", Hugo-Bader exoticises the people he encounters and objectifies their bodies: "You cannot rely on racial appearance around here. It is deceptive. I have met dark-complexioned Caucasian-looking women who were Russian, and Jewish women who were as white as angels. I have even talked to a Jewish lady who was as yellow as a ripe melon. One of her grandmothers was Jewish, and all other grandparents – Chinese. She is emigrating to Israel" (Hugo-Bader, 2010, p. 98). Thubron also inspects physical appearance: "I searched in vain among them for a Jewish face. Even the older street facades showed no trace of the early immigrants" (Thubron, 2001, p. 219).

The person who most often appears in texts devoted to Birobidzhan is Dov Kofman, the physically handicapped leader of the Jewish community Beit Tshuva (from the early 1990s until 2009, when he decided to make aliyah). His representations tend to focus on his age (Slater writes that he is ninety years old, while in fact he was born in 1948, which makes him sixty at the time of their meeting), his long beard, the story of his circumcision, and the fact that for some time Jews and Subbotniks prayed together in the same "synagogue" in Maiakovskii Street. Hugo-Bader recounts how Dov (referred to as "a freak", Pol. *dziwoląg*) tried to get circumcised. Although the first attempt was his own, the second – medical, and the third – ritual, the rendering of the story creates an impression of Birobidzhan as a "strange place" where even circumcision takes place three times. In Książek's article, Kofman (referred to as "Rabbi", Pol. *rebe*) resembles a rabbi from a mythical shtetl: "He will give his guest a kippah, invite him to the table and to pray together; he talks about the prophets, and even hopes that he will have a minyan at last" (Książek, 2010). Thubron writes about him as follows: "Some spinal deformity had stooped him forward from the waist, but in the white dust of his hair and beard a steep forehead and tranquil eyes lent him dual authority" (Thubron, 2001, p. 220).[9]

The architecture of the local "synagogue" tempts writers to construct somewhat infantile representations: "a tiny little cottage with two rooms and a porch" (Hugo-Bader, 2010, p. 99); "the interior of the synagogue is as blue as heaven, the difference is that it has a little less room" (Książek, 2010); "a painted cottage where chrysanthemums were poking through the snow" (Thubron, 2001, p. 219), "the paint-slathered lean-to" (Slater, 2009), "a Siberian-style wooden house" (McMahon, 2001).

Birobidzhan's response

The politics of representation adopted in Birobidzhan aims to develop a local *imaginarium* of "Jewishness". As it is, the understanding of the concept mainly stems from the strategies adopted by such actors as: the regional authorities, which are keen on preserving their autonomy and securing the highest possible subsidies from Moscow; representatives of the local Jewish community, who care about quality cultural offer, religious celebrations

[9] Thubron tends to provide rather unflattering descriptions of people he encounters on his journey across Siberia, for example: "He looked as a sick hare might, whose delicate scaffold of bones could break at any time" (Thubron, 2001, p. 223); "She laughed in a glare of cavities and gold, as if her world were complete" (2001, p. 226).

and social welfare for its members; local artists, who are interested in stimulating a demand for "Jewish art", and so on. Local Jewish identities, in turn, often elude the rigid criteria of legal discourses.

It seems that journalistic texts produced on the basis of short visits to the region are prone to oversimplification and unfair against its people. Attempting to defend themselves, those who live in Birobidzhan take advantage of the vagueness of the post-Soviet situation and rely on healing repetitions typical of restorative nostalgia and "similarity disorder", as well as on actions involving the ironic acceptance of the fragmentary nature of Jewish experience – fragmented, endlessly contested Birobidzhan bricolages (which can be seen as a manifestation of the "contiguity disorder").

The local residents interviewed in the course of my ethnographic research which I conducted in the Jewish Autonomous Region in 2008–2010 were aware of how Birobidzhan was presented elsewhere. "Everyone is interested: there's this region somewhere out there; and it's even more interesting because it's been an experiment. People have heard that there's this Jewish Region of some sort, and they think it must be a fake", said one of my informants. Another local resident made the following comment: "There've been many unfavourable and insulting publications saying something like: there's one and a half Jew there in all and they keep up this image that they have their culture there". The governor of the region complained: "There was this period, around 2000, when there wasn't a single positive article about the region. Journalists wrote them without even coming here. They wrote that it's a Stalinist region, created by Stalin, that Stalin had deported people here, that it had been a ghetto, that people couldn't leave and they still can't".

Some Birobidzhan residents reproduce criticism expressed by Western authors that the initial ideological potential was neglected. In doing so, however, they do not share their opinions attributing this to some inherent features of the reality of the East, of which Stalinism was a syndrome.

One of my informants rejected the claim that Birobidzhan had been a failed dream and pointed out that the Zionist project had also been characterised by increasingly greater discrepancies between the original idea and its implementation: "I can very often hear something that I find insulting, that the Birobidzhan project was a failure. Yes, their dreams didn't come true. And the dreams of the first settlers in Israel, did they come true? It's been fifty years they've been fighting. And they'll keep fighting. Is this a dream? Is this what they dreamed about?" On another occasion, the same informant seemed to reject the concept

of utopia as a pipe dream: "Birobidzhan – it wasn't a project, it wasn't an experiment, it was a great historical fact. Birobidzhan was built by the whole nation, by the whole young Soviet Union; even more than that, it was built by the whole world. Not all [of those who arrived] could endure living down here; many of them left. But people kept building it".

If the matter of the assessment of the Birobidzhan project and its comparison with Israel was raised at all, the informants tended to observe that – unlike Israel – it had been "abandoned" while in progress rather than qualify it as a "failed" idea as such. Also, they often mentioned an important fact that the region had unexpectedly become a safe haven for Jews: those who arrived there before the Second World War avoided the Holocaust. One of the informants phrased this as follows: "All the Jews who moved over here would have died during the war. And they survived here. That's why the region should still exist. We have to remember about this experience".

Summing up the pattern of their reactions to the stories about the region imposed from outside, it seems that Birobidzhan residents mainly express their concern about critical opinions which contextualise it as a "substitute" Jewish state (e.g. by comparing it to Israel). They protest against reducing their lives to a failure and making assessments of their history through the lens of propaganda materials from the early days of the region. They do not want to see Birobidzhan reduced to an exhibit in a gallery of curiosities, and members of the local Jewish community – to theatrical puppets or objects in a cynical game of "playing Jews". Making a decision to produce a "representation" requires an awareness of its political implications, of the need to include the experience and interests of a given group in the picture. Indeed, the concept of representation involves the idea of someone being represented by a spokesperson (Bourdieu, 2000). As it is, the external discourse on the Jewish Autonomous Region is strongly resented by local residents because it involves certain categories that deny them subjectivity. The people of Birobidzhan strive for their right to representation and stress the unique character and history of their region. In this way, they try to liberate themselves from the post-Cold War narration, in which the roles were assigned a long time ago.

Translated by Piotr Styk

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A "zoo" and "mock-up": On the most frequent ways of portraying Birobidzhan

Abstract

The article analyses the most common ways of depicting Birobidzhan by journalists, bloggers, film-makers and writers. Established in 1934, the Jewish Autonomous Region is an administrative unit within the Russian Federation. Foreign visitors and visitors from other parts of Russia usually perceive it as "exotic", "funny", "absurd", "grotesque" or "artificial". Its

history is seen as a "failure", especially when compared to Israel. In various representations, the notion of "utopia" is used in a very narrow, negative sense of "unrealistic pipe dream". This orientalisation results in the objectification of local residents and delegitimisation of their practices of making sense of the region's history.

Keywords:
representation, Birobidzhan, utopia, orientalism, USRR, Russia

„Zoo" i „makieta". O dominujących sposobach pisania o Birobidżanie

Abstrakt

W artykule przeanalizowane zostały najczęstsze sposoby opisywania Birobidżanu przez dziennikarzy, blogerów, filmowców i pisarzy. Utworzony w 1934 r. Żydowski Obwód Autonomiczny wciąż istnieje jako jednostka administracyjna w ramach Federacji Rosyjskiej. Zazwyczaj traktowany jest przez odwiedzających z innych części Rosji lub z zagranicy jako „egzotyczny", „śmieszny", „absurdalny", „groteskowy" czy „sztuczny". Jego historia postrzegana jest jako „porażka", zwłaszcza w porównaniu z historią Izraela. Autorzy rozmaitych przedstawień Birobidżanu posługują się także koncepcją „utopii" w jej zawężonym, negatywnym rozumieniu, jako „nierealnej mrzonki". Orientalizacja Żydowskiego Obwodu Autonomicznego przyczynia się do uprzedmiotowienia jego mieszkańców i delegitymizowania ich praktyk nadawania sensu historii regionu.

Słowa kluczowe:
reprezentacja, Birobidżan, utopia, orientalizm, ZSRR, Rosja

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