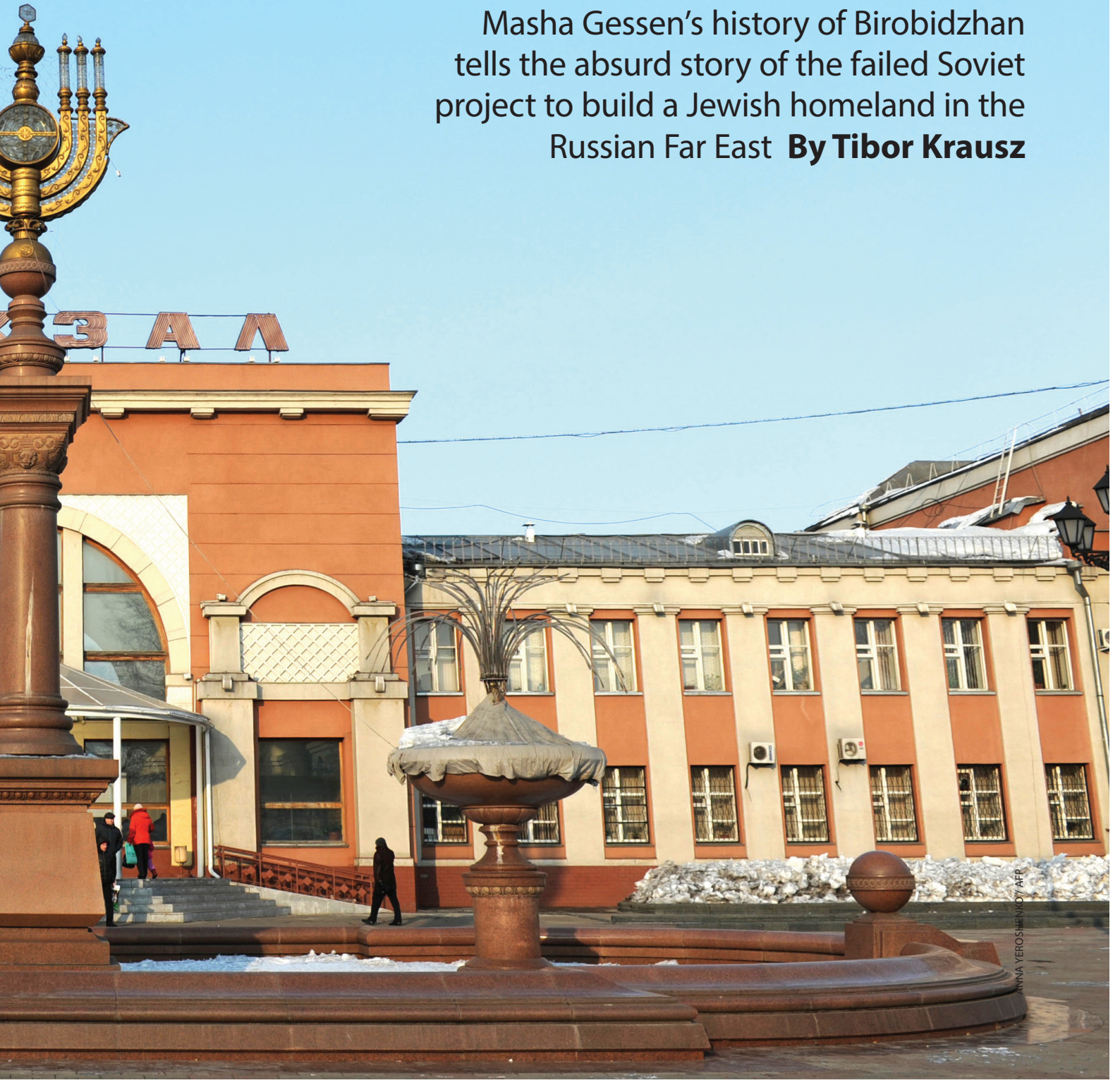
Hardly a land o

A menorah stands at the center of Birobidzhan City, the administrative center of the Jewish autonomous region in eastern Russia

# of milk and honey

Masha Gessen's history of Birobidzhan tells the absurd story of the failed Soviet project to build a Jewish homeland in the Russian Far East **By Tibor Krausz**



ANNA YEROSHENKO/ AFP

Birobidzhan. The very word evokes farce and weirdness, an apotheosis of Marxist hubris about the allegedly redemptive values of communism over age-old religious traditions and national longings. Some ideas are so bizarre, to paraphrase George Orwell, that only visionaries or imbeciles can believe in them. Once hatched, however, they can gain a life of their own – given enough visionaries or imbeciles to keep them alive.

The Soviet plan of creating a homeland for Jews in Birobidzhan at the back of beyond in Siberia was one such idea. It consisted of shipping numerous Russian Jews off to the easternmost fringes of the vast Russian landmass so that they could play at being an autonomous nation within the big happy family of Soviet nations under the benevolent guidance of Comrade Stalin.

Once there, these thoroughly secular Jews would build a homeland that rivalled the Zionist project in Palestine and create a whole new Jew with a whole new Jewish identity: a staunchly socialist Jew speaking Yiddish (a language adopted for Birobidzhan instead of Hebrew, a tongue seen as tainted by its association with Zionism) so as to sing the praises of Stalin and extol the virtues of Marxism-Leninism.

That was the plan at any rate. In reality there was little to extol in Yiddish or any other tongue. Birobidzhan's Jewish Autonomous *Oblast* (administrative region) proved to be neither really Jewish nor really autonomous. It became not a thriving new state for Jews but yet another stifling *shtetl*. To boot, it lay in the middle of nowhere on the border with Manchuria in northeast China, 4,000 miles and seven time zones from Moscow – a place that held as much familiarity and historical resonance for Jews as did Fiji or Uganda.

In short order, after its creation in the late 1920s, Birobidzhan turned into a remote prison of sorts for Russian Jews who had chosen to relocate there, rather than emigrate to Palestine. These pioneers, driven by a misplaced sense of nation-building, built themselves a capital with sweat, toil and plenty of zeal, only to find themselves languishing in their remote exile with its harsh climate – all the while fearing the knock on the door that would signal the arrival of armed men who would drag them away to prison camps for the "crime" of being Jews. The Tzarist pogroms, these idealistic Jewish communists soon found to their horror, had simply been replaced by Stalinist purges, which would take a far greater toll on Jews and Jewish life in Russia.

In her readable, if wanting, history of Birobidzhan, "Where the Jews Aren't," Russian-born Jewish-American author Masha Gessen calls Jewish autonomy there the "worst good idea ever," though it's not certain that is what it was. It seems, certainly in hindsight, to have been a classic case of a horrible idea from the get-go. In any event, if the Russian Jews who moved there, Gessen notes, "held any hope for building a home in Birobidzhan, it was hope of the desperate sort." That is to say, life in Stalin's Russia was bad for everyone, but it could be especially precarious for Jews, who were treated with suspicions over their possible Zionist leanings and alleged "rootless cosmopolitanism." Thus, the chance of resettling in the Far East where they could be their own masters must have seemed like one worth taking.

IDEOLOGY, TOO, played a part in their decision. Influenced by the political creed of Autonomism, whose main proponent was the Russian-Jewish historian and philosopher Simon Dubnow, they remained opposed to Zionism, which Dubnow dismissed as a recrudescence of biblically inspired folkish romanticism in the guise of Jewish nationalism. Dubnow considered the Zionist enterprise in Palestine to be a stillborn project, "a beautiful messianic dream." He envisioned no more than half a million Jews living in Palestine by the year 2000.

The best Jews could hope for, Dubnow argued in the first decades of the 20th century, was not a full-blown state in Palestine but cultural autonomy and political self-rule in the Diaspora driven by a "spiritual revival" centered on Yiddish and a traditional Jewish way of life. Dubnow, who was opposed to the project in Birobidzhan, died in 1941 (he was murdered by the Nazis in Latvia) and Autonomism perished with him in the ashes of the Holocaust – but not before Birobidzhan, a project hatched mostly by Stalinist bureaucrats, had come into its own.

From April 1928 onward, Russian Jews, many from the Pale of Settlement, started resettling in their brand-new Mesopotamia, an underdeveloped area flanked by two rivers, the Bira and the Bidzhan. Idealistic Jewish socialists from abroad (from as far away as the US and Argentina), too, came in droves. At first there was nothing but a ramshackle train station called Tikhonkaya ("Little Quiet One"), "which was someone's polite way of saying 'godforsaken,'" Gessen writes.

The first few trainloads of Jewish arrivals – 504 families and 150 individuals – alone doubled the population of the hamlet, "which at that time boasted 237 houses, a single elementary school, and one shop." When the rains came, residents traversed rickety planks laid in the mud. Undaunted, the pioneering colonists set about living off the hardscrabble land, which was sparsely populated by mostly nomadic Amur Cossacks and ethnic Koreans. Their new home turned out to be less than ideal real estate. Hardly a land of milk and honey, their Stalinist Promised Land was hilly, rocky and swampy; it was also infested with a variety of bloodsucking insects.

The weather could have been better too: it was bitingly cold in winter, swelteringly hot at times in summer. The very first summer floods from torrential downpours washed away the settlers' incipient crops while an anthrax epidemic wiped out their cattle. It didn't help that few of them had ever worked as farmers before. Come winter, they mostly starved and huddled, shivering, around flimsy, improvised hearths. On the sunnier side, one presumes, here was a place where Jewish settlers weren't condemned as neocolonialist interlopers by the wider world.

Just as their brethren in Palestine, the Jewish pioneers in Birobidzhan persisted – or at least those of them who did not soon flee back whence they had come. They set up collective farms with names like Valdheim ("forest home" in Yiddish) and Yiddish became the new *oblast*'s official language, proudly displayed on street signs, used in government offices and taught in schools. The burgeoning city of Birobidzhan soon had a Yiddish newspaper, a Yiddish theater named after Stalin's Jewish henchman Lazar Kaganovich, and a library named after the writer Sholem Aleichem. In 1935 alone, 8,000 new Jewish settlers arrived, doubling the local Jewish population.

Then tragedy struck. Not even this heady experiment in Jewish autonomy and cultural revival in Soviet Russia could escape the cold hard realities of Stalinism. The nationwide Great Terror of 1936-38 didn't spare the Jews of Birobidzhan: many of them were declared "class enemies" and either sent to the gulags or liquidated. The Yiddish writer David Bergelson, who hailed from a Ukrainian *shtetl* and had by then become Birobidzhan's most vocal advocate, escaped by alternatively penning sycophantic paeans about certain communist notables or else fiercely denouncing

them, depending on how the political winds blew.

In the end, though, Bergelson, too, came a cropper. In 1952, during yet another one of Stalin's purges, he was executed, along with 12 other Jews, in Moscow's notorious Lubyanka Prison on what came to be known as

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"the Night of the Murdered Poets" on August 12. They had been branded "rootless cosmopolitans," a trumped-up charge which henceforth marked all Russian Jews as suspect and served as an enduring pillar of Soviet anti-Semitism.

BERGELSON DOMINATES much of Gessen's narrative, which is a pity. Frequently, the book reads as less a history of Birobidzhan than a biography of Bergelson, a talented writer but a flawed man. He isn't a fascinating enough character to warrant so much attention at the expense of all other Jews in the story of Birobidzhan who remain mere bit players in the author's otherwise informative tale: they flicker into view, then promptly out of it. Their trials and tribulations are treated almost in passing, nor do we get to know them as individuals in their own right.

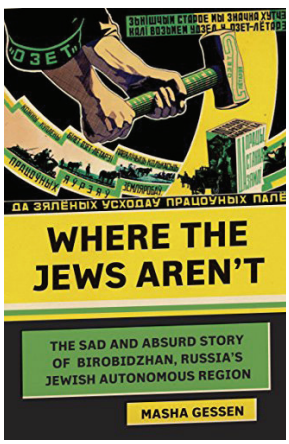
For long stretches Birobidzhan, too, remains shunted into the background with much of the action taking place elsewhere and only tangentially related, if at all, to the purported subject of the book. That, too, is a pity, for Gessen is a capable storyteller but one who seems unsure of what story she wants to tell. She flits from locale to locale and topic to topic, yet, curiously, leaves largely unexplored the question of how the concept of Jewish nationhood became yoked to the goals of Soviet communism, surely a subject worthy of exploration.

Following the creation of Israel in 1948, to which Stalin at first lent fleeting support in the hopes of undermining US interests in the Middle East, terror resumed at home once again. Several of the more prominent Jewish intellectuals in Birobidzhan found themselves rebranded as "bourgeois nationalists." Ironically, primary among the charges levelled at them was their promotion of Yiddish at the expense of "the great Russian language of Lenin and Stalin" (in the words of a prosecutor), even though the adoption of Yiddish in Birobidzhan had hitherto been encouraged by Moscow. The accused were either killed or sentenced to hard labor. So it went in the Alice in Wonderland world of Soviet communism: hailed as a pioneer one day, executed as a traitor the next.

In tandem, every Yiddish-language book in sight was burned. On Stalin's orders, Yiddish theaters were closed down and Yiddishists were hounded, persecuted and murdered. Henceforth all Jews in Birobidzhan would need to speak Russian while Jewish children were forced to adopt new Russian identities. Overt anti-Semitism among non-Jewish locals intensified. Thus stripped of its Jewish identity and its pioneering spirit, Birobidzhan sank into mediocrity as just another remote province – even as Israel, a true state for the Jews but one endlessly maligned in Soviet propaganda – began to thrive.

By Stalin's death in 1953, "Birobidzhan was a shadow of the illusion it had once been," Gessen surmises. That shadow is still cast, however faintly. Today, despite its distinctly Jewish mien with its public menorahs and statues of famous Jews including Sholem Aleichem, Birobidzhan is home to fewer than 2,000 Jews. Down from a peak of 30,000, a quarter of the population in 1948, they now account for a mere 1 percent of it. A handful of them attend a synagogue that stands on a street still named after Lenin, and the town now has its own rabbi, a Lubavitcher Hasid from the Chabad outreach movement. Some local restaurants woo Jewish tourists by serving Jewish specialties like gefilte fish and schnitzel. The latter, though, Gessen notes apropos her own visit to a local Jewish-themed eatery, "turned out to be made of pork."

Perhaps that should not surprise us. Right from the start Birobidzhan has always been like that: Jewish on the surface but not in any significant depth. The idea of Jewish autonomy in the Russian Far East was always bound to be a failed experiment and none of us should mourn its passing. ■



Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region
Masha Gessen
Schocken
192 pages; $18.41