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Abram Bragin and Projects for Jewish National Settlement in the USSR

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The Jewish question occupied an important place among the problems that faced the Soviet Government in its early years. The need to resolve it was all the more pressing because of the social and economic plight of the Jewish population by the time of the end of the Civil War in the areas they traditionally inhabited.¹ The party and Soviet leadership were also seriously concerned about the widespread popular perception of Soviet power as Jewish power. All the propaganda media, including speeches of state leaders from the highest rostrums, were pressed into service to dispel these sentiments.² Finally, a successful solution of the “eternal” Jewish question was to demonstrate to the whole world the advantages of the Soviet system.

In the early 1920s the Party and Soviet leadership put forward a program of “reconstruction of the social composition of the Jewish population of the USSR” which was a code name for reorientation of Jews towards agricultural activities.³

On August 29, 1924, the Presidium of the Nationalities Council of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR formed a Committee for Land Allocation to the Working Jews (*KomZET*). Its first chairman was Pyotr Smidovich, who originally came from a Russian-Polish noble family, a veteran of the Bolshevik Party.

On January 17, 1925, the All-Union Society for Land Allocation to Working Jews in the USSR (*OZET*) was formed in aid of *KomZET*. Officially *OZET* was a nonparty citizens’ organization. More than half of its leaders were “currently nonparty old Jewish public figures.”⁴ The governing board of *OZET* was headed by Yury Larin, a prominent Soviet economist and one of the founders of *Gosplan*. The key task of *OZET* was to promote *KomZET*’s projects of “agrarization” of the Jewish population in and outside the Soviet Union as well as raising money to finance these projects.⁵ As early as the first half of the 1920s it became evident that “agrarization” alone was not sufficient to bring about a comprehensive solution of the Jewish question. In line with the by then

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established course for the development of new socialist nations on the basis of old bourgeois ones,⁶ a decision was made on the territorial and national development of the poorest Jewish masses. According to the Kremlin's plan, giving Jews the same political rights as to other peoples of the USSR by granting them territorial-national autonomy would integrate them into the "family of fraternal peoples."

The activities aimed at territorial-national development of Jews in the Soviet Union and its results came in for scientific analysis already in the 1920s. The most important works of that period belong to the leaders of *KomZET* and *OZET*.⁷ In the second half of the last century a series of publications on the history of the solution of the Jewish issue in the USSR were produced by foreign authors and historians of the Jewish people many of whom originally came from Russia.⁸ To date, Antje Kuchenbecker has come up with the most thorough and complete study of the inception, development and implementation of the Soviet project of territorial national development of the Jews.⁹

Gennady Kostyrchenko remarked that eventually the Jewish issue in the USSR was solved not through territorial national revival of the Jewish people but through intensive assimilation of Jews which, as the author stressed, was until the late 1940s "natural, voluntary and unforced."¹⁰

A prominent role in territorial and national settlement of Jews in the USSR was played by one of the leaders of *OZET*, Abram Bragin (1893-1938). Bragin's life path was in many ways typical of all the participants of the left-wing Zionist groups that had sprung up in the Russian Empire and that after the 1917 Revolution linked their dream of the national revival of the Jewish people with the Bolshevik nationalities policy. At the same time Bragin's talent for organization and public speaking, coupled with his prodigious capacity for hard work, put him in the front ranks of Soviet Jewish public figures in the 1920s—1930s.

Bragin got a law degree from St. Vladimir Kiev Imperial University. As a student he was active in the Zionist workers' movement *Zierei Zion* (the Youth of Zion) which combined training of Jewish youth at agricultural study centers for colonization of Palestine with revolutionary struggle to overthrow Tsarism, for national equality and autonomy of the Russian Jewry. After October 1917 Bragin worked at the People's Commissariat of Agriculture. Without any doubt, he represented that section of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia of which Mikhail Kalinin said that "at a time when much of Russian intelligentsia shied away, scared of the revolution, it was at that very moment that the Jewish intelligentsia flooded the revolutionary channel, filled it with a larger percentage compared with their total numbers and began working in the revolutionary government bodies."¹¹

An entry on Bragin in the first edition of the *New Soviet Encyclopedia* notes his contribution as a "practical agricultural administrator" and "public worker" "to encourage the initiative of the broad masses in the battle for harvest."¹² In 1923 the future *OZET* leader was appointed director of the first All-Union Agricultural and Crafts Industry Exhibition. Bragin managed to distinguish himself not only as a responsible state official, but as a brilliant journalist and lecturer.

His articles were printed in many Soviet and Party newspapers, including the *Pravda*, and were signed *Bespartynny* (*nonparty member*) because he had never been a member of the Social Democratic and Communist parties. Many of Bragin's essays were devoted to the Jewish question. Along with other authors who studied the socioeconomic position of the Jewish masses in the USSR he wrote about the crisis of the Jewish boroughs (*shtetls*).¹³ In 1924 he co-authored with Mikhail Koltsov the book *The Fate of Jewish Masses in the USSR* which linked the future of Jewry in the Ukraine and Byelorussia with the creation of a Jewish agricultural center.¹⁴

The idea of organizing such centers in the Southern Ukraine and Northern Crimea was first put forward by Joseph Rosen, the director of the Russian branch of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or Joint, prominent Moscow-born agronomist and public figure. Joint financed the creation by *OZET* of Jewish agricultural settlements, opened medical centers, lending offices and vocational schools for Jewish farmers.¹⁵ Bragin and Deputy People's Commissar for Nationalities Grigory Broydo¹⁶ initiated the official discussion of the project which was later referred to by the Soviet top officialdom as the "Crimean-KomZET" project. Bragin became actively involved in developing the plan to set up Jewish farms in the Crimea and became the deputy and right hand of *OZET* Chairman Larin promoting the "Crimean-KomZET project."

In the 1920s Bragin was known abroad as the advocate of plans of giving farmland to Soviet Jews. In 1925 he gave lectures in Berlin, Paris and London "On the Decisions of the Soviet Government to Create a Jewish Agricultural Center, on the Resettlement of Jewish Working People to the Crimea." Foreign news agencies at the time wrote about the "Crimean project" often giving all the credit for its authorship to Bragin. Apparently it was not by chance that it was Bragin who in a February 1924 interview to the Jewish Telegraph Agency (JTA) first announced to the world public the plans to create a Jewish autonomy in the USSR: "When Jewish colonization is sufficiently developed, which may be achieved by about 1927, that area will be declared an autonomy under an independent Jewish Government."¹⁷ The idea of creating Jewish autonomous areas in Southern Ukraine and Northern Crimea had the backing of the Chairman of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, Mikhail Kalinin, who said in July 1926 that "only the Jews, scattered among other nationalities, had been unable to obtain territorial autonomy although their total number in the Union, between 2.5 and 3 million, entitles them to autonomy... Only the Jewish nation here does not have its own government."¹⁸ The People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgy Chicherin, expressed sympathy for the plans of "agrarization" of Jews on "fertile virgin lands climatically suitable for Jewish settlers and located geographically close to the former Pale where the majority of Jews live."¹⁹

The Party and Soviet leadership believed that attracting foreign, above all Jewish, funds was a key condition for implementing the plans of territorial-national development of the poorest Jewish masses in Byelorussia, the Ukraine and South-Western parts of the RSFSR. "The government for its part is bending

every effort to provide at least some material assistance (to the Jewish colonists)," Kalinin told an all-Union *OZET* Congress in November 1927. "But, on the other hand, the Soviet Government does not object to Jewish settlers receiving assistance from Jewish capitalists outside the USSR." The *CEC* Chairman saw the rendering of such assistance as the result of "common interests proceeding from different points of view—the preservation of the bulk of the Jewish people, and the stake put on the Jewish capitalists' sentiments of blood kinship with all Jews; while being capitalists and enjoying their benefits, they cannot at the same time sleep calmly knowing that the people of kindred blood are suffering and leading a miserable life."²⁰

The main rival of the Soviet government in attracting foreign capitals to help resettle the poorest Jewish masses in Byelorussia, the Ukraine and South-Western RSFSR was the Zionist organization. In the 1920s the "struggle for the soul of the Jewish people" of which Winston Churchill wrote referring to the need for Jews to choose between Bolshevism and Zionism,²¹ reached its peak. As early as January 4, 1924, a cable was sent from Moscow "to all the American newspapers" which reported that "the Soviet government is planning to create a Jewish homeland on Russian territory, instead of Palestine which does not attract the Jewish masses... There are plans to colonize undeveloped parts of Northern Crimea under an autonomous Jewish government within a federation with Russia." The struggle, however, was not so much for souls as for capital. The Zionist organization, in spite of all its efforts, failed to get any support from Joint and the early successes of "Jewish colonization in the Ukraine, Crimea and Byelorussia which (unlike the Jewish colonization of Palestine.—*M.A.*) began without any outside assistance" and prompted Joint "to repeal in early 1925 its earlier decision to shut down and... to create first a 15-million and then a 25 million aid fund, mainly (more than half.—*M.A.*) for providing Jews with land in the USSR."²²

The Party and Soviet leadership offered a kind of compromise to the Zionists. It was perhaps first announced by the Jewish Telegraph Agency in February 1924 in the "Bragin Memorandum" on Jewish colonization of the Crimea which stressed that "the authors of the project by no means regard it as counteraction to the Zionist movement," and elsewhere he writes: "...They are mindful of the fact that the Jewish question in other countries tends to be resolved through Zionism."²³ The thesis whereby in the USSR the Jewish question, like other national problems, has been resolved on the basis of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine in the spirit of "all-round development of all nations and peoples towards their rapprochement and fraternal mutual assistance" and that therefore was incompatible with the Zionist program, which is unacceptable in the USSR, whereas it could well be recognized by Moscow as a method of resolving the Jewish issue in the capitalist countries, cropped up from time to time in Soviet foreign policy statements in the 1920s in connection with the Crimean project and in the 1930s in the light of Germany's policy of discrimination of Jews and of forcing them to emigrate. However, such a division of areas of competence was totally unacceptable for the Zionist Organization which promoted the idea

of the national unity of the world Jewry and, equally important, pinned great hopes on Russian Zionists who in the first half of the 1920s had created a network of training and production agricultural and crafts centers for training colonists for future settlement of Palestine. Such a compromise was even less acceptable for the Zionist Organization because of the crisis in Palestine in the mid-1920s and a dramatic slowdown of Jewish immigration there that continued until the early 1930s.

“At the Philadelphia Congress of Joint (in April 1925.—*M.A.*) Zionists went out of their way to disrupt the campaign to raise money to help the formation of a Jewish autonomy (in the USSR.—*M.A.*)” as the correspondent of the Communist Jewish newspaper in New York Moishe Katz reported to the Press Department of the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.²⁴ Indeed, the delegates of the Philadelphia Congress of Joint raised the issue of “whether the American Jewry should seek to promote widescale Jewish colonization in the USSR or confine itself to aiding the rehabilitation of the Jewish population of the former Pale while concentrating on the historical task of colonizing Palestine.” As a result of prolonged and sharp discussions the Congress passed a resolution in support of colonizing Palestine, but simultaneously decided to raise \$15 million for providing land to Jews in the USSR. The sum to be raised to help Zionist colonization of Palestine was put at \$30 million.²⁵ Nevertheless, according to *KomZET* by the end of 1928 “out of the 22,497,468 rubles spent on agrarization of Jews during the past 4 years state budget allocations accounted for 4,249,608 rubles and the money in foreign currency provided by foreign organizations accounted for 16,665,860 rubles.”²⁶ Thus foreign funds invested four times more than the Soviet state in Jewish colonization in the USSR.

By the late 1920s three Jewish national districts were created in the Ukraine: Kalinindorf, Novo-Zlatopolsky and Stalindorf. In the Crimea Jews were given an area of 342,000 hectares, mainly in the Yevpatoriya and Dzhankoy, areas from which the Fraydorf Jewish national district was isolated in 1929 and the Larindorf Jewish national district in 1935. However, contrary to the expectations of *OZET* leaders, they never became the “foundation of a future Autonomous Jewish Soviet Republic or national area.” Jewish colonization of North Crimea caused a groundswell of anti-Semitic and nationalist sentiments among the Crimean Tatars led by Veli Ibrahimov, Chairman of the CEC of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In November 1926 Larin’s call made at *OZET* Congress “to gradually shift Jews to the land and eventually create a national Jewish Republic in the North Crimea through organizing mass Jewish settlements” caused a storm of indignation among the Crimean Tatars.²⁷ Not wishing to aggravate the already tense interethnic relations in the Crimean Peninsula, which was strategically important for defense, the Kremlin gave up the plan to create an autonomous Jewish area there.

At the same time, in spite of the success of Jewish colonization in the Ukraine and the Crimea, the overall position of the Jewish population in the country’s West and South-West remained miserable and indeed grew much

worse in some cases. "The economic situation of the Jewish masses in the USSR continues to deteriorate year in and year out and has now reached a point where the measures being taken by Soviet government to involve Jews in productive labor are woefully inadequate and incommensurate with the gravity of their plight," *KomZET* reported to the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR of 1928. *KomZET* report stressed the "colossal impoverishment of the Jewish masses" and "an incredibly large percentage of persons stripped of their civil rights": "in the Ukraine the percentage of such persons in the Jewish boroughs is as high as 40%.²⁸

On March 28, 1928, the Presidium of the CEC USSR passed a resolution "On Allocating to *KomZET* Lands along the Amur River in the Far Eastern Territory for Settlement by Working Jews." In April 1928 the "Birsko-Bidzhansky District was designated as the territory for compact settlement."²⁹ Viktoriya Romanova notes in her study that the allocation of the "Birobidzhan District for Jewish colonization... was called upon to solve three key national tasks.

- First, to improve the demographic situation in the sparsely populated Far East considering the weakness of the border and spontaneous migration from neighboring China.
- Second, Jewish settlers, with the financial support of the foreign diaspora, were to intensify the development of the borderland territory in the context of the complicated geopolitical situation in the region.
- Third, it was to defuse the problem of the economic plight of the mass of the Jewish population formerly beyond the Pale."³⁰

Moscow's military strategic plans played an important role in the choice of the Birsko-Bidzhansky District. According to Pavel Sudoplatov, the idea of settling Jews in Birobidzhan was to "put a barrier in their way (Chinese and White Guard terrorist groups.—*M.A.*) by setting up settlements whose inhabitants were hostile to the White emigrants and especially the Cossacks."³¹

According to the Kremlin's design, the Birobidzhan project was to be on a much more ambitious scale than the Crimean and even the Palestinian ones. It is important to note that the decision of the CEC Presidium on the settlement of the Birsko-Bidzhansky district... by working Jews" initially envisaged "the possibility of the formation on the territory of that district of a Jewish national administrative-territorial entity."³² This was a kind of reward for Jewish pioneers driven by the national idea for their readiness to assume the arduous task of developing the Far East. Larin and Bragin were resolute opponents of that plan believing that the harsh nature and climate of Birobidzhan made it unfit for agricultural colonization. However, their opinions were dismissed.³³ The main work of developing Birobidzhan and getting the working Jews to go there fell to *KomZET* which was given about 4.5 million hectares of land along the Amur River in the Far Eastern territory. The link between the Birobidzhan project and the plan of creating there "a national Soviet Jewish state entity" was to provide Moscow, as the Crimean experience had shown, with broad opportunities for

mobilizing internal and external resources.³⁴ Proceeding along this path, the CEC RSFSR on August 20, 1930, passed a resolution *On the Formation of the Birobidzhan National District as Part of the Far Eastern Territory*. However, the efforts of the Soviet leadership to convert the Zionist beliefs and sympathies that part of the Soviet Jews still had into a Soviet version of territorialism (“the socialist Jewish autonomy”) did not bring the desired results. The Soviet leadership had hoped that by the end of the first five-year plan period (1933) the Jewish population of the Birsko-Bidzhan District would reach 60,000 and at the end of the second five-year plan period (1938) 150,000. In reality only 19,635 Jews arrived there in 1928-1933, of whom 11,450 had left Birobidzhan by the early 1933.³⁵ The attitude of international Jewish organizations to the Birobidzhan project, even after the status of the Birobidzhan National District was upgraded to that of a Jewish Autonomous Area in May 1934, was lukewarm. The amount of foreign aid was nothing to be compared with the amount of foreign investments in the Crimean project.

The interest of foreign Jewish organizations in Birobidzhan increased markedly with the rise of anti-Jewish trends in the policies of Central and East European countries in the mid-1930s. They proposed to the Soviet government several projects of settlement of Jewish refugees there. In 1935 a citizens’ committee Ambidzhan (the American Committee for the Settlement of Jews in Birobidzhan) was created, one of whose main aims was to assist the settlement of Jewish refugees from European countries in the Jewish Autonomous Area.³⁶ Joint told the Soviet government that it was ready to take an active part and be helpful in the settlement of immigrant Jews from the countries where they were persecuted.³⁷ In spite of the fact that the Soviet press constantly wrote about the movement of Jews from Argentina, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, the USA, France, and, significantly, from Palestine, by 1932 just 870 foreigners were involved in the development of the Birobidzhan national region. Stalin’s leadership was not prepared to open up the country’s borders for massive Jewish immigration. The discussion of the issue of the Soviet Union accepting Jewish refugees by the Party and Soviet leadership saw Bragin’s last initiative that took the form of a personal appeal to Stalin at the Central Committee of the *VKP(b)* to Georgy Dimitrov at the Comintern and to Kalinin at the CEC USSR.³⁸

“Bragin’s appeal was prompted by awareness of the deadly threat faced by the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe. “The Jewish working masses of Germany and Poland are on the brink of annihilation,” Bragin wrote. “Not only are half a million German Jews under threat. Next on the agenda is the introduction of a Ghetto in Austria. A wave of pogroms is advancing on 5 million Jews in Poland, Hungary and Romania.” At the same time Bragin thought it was impossible for millions of Jews from these countries to move to the USSR. The only option that could be discussed was receiving and settling “allowed contingents of settlers from the West” in Birobidzhan and “the most disadvantaged exiles from Germany” in the more prosperous collective farms in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, the Crimea and Birobidzhan.” *OZET* saw a way out of the situation in involving European Jews in the antifascist movement under Moscow’s lead-

ership. Bragin called on his addressees to exert every effort to help the Jewish working people in the above mentioned countries “to understand that for them victory over fascism was a life and death issue and that such a victory could only be achieved through forming a popular front.”

In Bragin’s opinion, only putting “the mounting protest of the Jewish masses against fascism... on the track of political slogans of the popular front” and their active involvement in antifascist struggle under Comintern leadership could save the European Jewry. Bragin called on the Stalin leadership to organize a series of propagandistic and humanitarian measures involving Jewish working people of the USSR “so that the delivery of aid coming from Soviet Russia would mark the start for the leading role of the Jewish working people of the USSR (especially in the struggle to attract the Jewish masses of the West to join the popular front).” Bragin urged Stalin to issue an immediate statement on “the Jewish question” which “fills the pages of the world press... and is on the agenda of parliaments and the League of Nations”: “The voice of our STALIN, the father of the oppressed throughout the world, must be heard all over the world... In the presence of Stalin... the foremost Jews-Stakhanovites of the USSR must tell the working people of the whole world: Ernst Thälmann’s prison cell and the Ghetto of the Jewish masses in Germany are locked with the same key.” In fact this amounted to turning Moscow into a center for the consolidation, propaganda and coordination of Jewish antifascist forces through “strengthening the influence of the Soviet Jewish people among the Jewish masses of the West.”

The USSR was to play the role of an undisputed leader in resolving the “Jewish issue” on the European scale because “Soviet power has done everything for the equality of Jewish workers in the USSR, for turning them into happy builders of their socialist motherland,” Bragin wrote. In other words, only the USSR could resolve the “intractable Jewish question” “on the basis of the teaching of Lenin and Stalin on the nationalities issue.” That is why the USSR, or rather the “Soviet Jewish people,” through its foremost representatives must call on the Jewish masses in the European countries to join the popular front.

Bragin’s project contained a twenty-point set of “practical proposals” the main one being as follows. First, rendering humanitarian aid to European Jews by “massive dispatch of food parcels to poor Jews in Germany and Poland...” Second, establishing interaction with the “leaders of Jewish associations in the West” and “Jewish scientists in the West” by organizing their meetings with the “Jewish workers of the USSR” and “a number of scientific conferences devoted to the history of the Jewish people in the light of Marxist analysis.” Third, broad popularization in the world of the achievements of the Soviet government in solving the Jewish question comprising a series of propagandistic and cultural and educational measures: “To publish for the benefit of Western Jews the best works of Soviet writers, poets... devoted to the life of Jewish masses in the USSR; ... to publish for distribution abroad a record of Lenin’s speech on anti-Jewish pogroms; ...to organize a tour of the best (Jewish) amateur theatrical cir-

cle in major centers of Europe and America, etc. Fourth, expansion and strengthening of the international links of the “Jewish working people of the USSR” as the vanguard of the world Jewry with the Jewish population in foreign states. Specifically, “in connection with the upcoming tenth anniversary, in the spring of 1937, of the formation of the Kalinindorf District, the world’s first Jewish national district,” Bragin proposed “to turn the Kalinindorf jubilee into a holiday of Jewish workers not only in the USSR but also abroad.”

Bragin singled out the importance of interaction of the “Jewish workers of the USSR” with the Jewish Palestine. He thought it was necessary to “accept the invitation to the USSR to take part in the Jaffa (Palestine) exhibition by presenting there the best specimens of the work of Stakhanovite Jews.” It has to be noted that in the 1920s—1930s trade and economic relations were established between the Soviet state trading organizations and the “Jewish national homeland” in Palestine. Soviet enterprises successfully took part in the Levant Fair in 1925 and 1932. In 1923 a Palestinian Pavilion was set up by Erez Israel Jewish Labor Federation, or Histadrut, at the First All-Union Agricultural and Crafts Exhibition in whose organization Bragin took a very active part.³⁹

In the context of the well-studied history of the creation, during the Great Patriotic War, of the Jewish Antifascist Committee (JAC) in the USSR, Bragin’s appeal can be seen as the first full-scale project of the international propaganda and mobilization measures of which the Jewish Antifascist Committee later became the main vehicle. However, Bragin’s project was unacceptable for Stalin’s leadership. Apparently the main reason why his plan was rejected was that it would involve the broad masses of Soviet Jews in international sociopolitical activities. In the case of the JAC the stake was put on the “Jewish intelligentsia” and not the “Jewish proletarians and collective farmers of the Soviet Union” or “Jewish Stakhanovites,” as proposed by Bragin. The concept of the JAC did not envisage the establishment of any relations between the Jewish workers in the USSR and the representatives of the “Jewish population of the West,” especially involving them in joint events on Soviet territory. The JAC was created and operated as a one-way channel of Soviet propaganda in the USA and Britain which by definition excluded any ideological feedback (the imagined departure of the JAC from that principle was put forward as the pretext for decimating the JAC in 1949-1952).

Equally unacceptable for Stalin’s leadership was Bragin’s proposal to make *OZET* the curator of the most important “practical proposals” he formulated. Although Bragin was careful to stress that “in all this work (of organizing the meetings between Jewish workers of the USSR and the leaders of Jewish associations of the West.—*M.A.*) the International Organization of Assistance to Revolutionary Fighters, or *MOPR*, was to play an important role so that *MOPR* should become an especially popular organization among Jewish workers throughout the world” and the very “initiative of raising the issue must belong to *MOPR*,” he pointed out at the same time that “*OZET* and *MOPR* should help each other.

Perhaps Bragin tried in this way to lend a new meaning to the existence of *OZET* whose sphere of competence in the early 1930s was so much reduced by the decisions of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR that at the fourth plenary session of *OZET* in February 1936 some of its members raised the issue of disbanding the organization. Perhaps Stalin for his part suspected Bragin of seeking to turn *OZET* into a genuine center for the organization of international Jewry on behalf of Moscow and the "Soviet Jewish people"? In any case the days of *OZET* were numbered. In the years of "the Stalin terror" *KomZET* and *OZET* were liquidated and practically all their leaders were repressed. The plans of creating Jewish statehood (a republic) on the territory of the USSR, declared back in 1934 by the Presidium of the CEC USSR, were disavowed in November 1936 in Stalin's speech *On the Draft Constitution of the USSR*. He named three conditions necessary for the transformation of an autonomous area into a republic: "First, the republic should be a borderland republic not surrounded on all sides by the territory of the USSR..., the nationality that gives its name to the Soviet republic must represent a more or less compact majority in that republic... and third, the republic must not be very small in terms of the size of its population, say, not less but more than a million."⁴⁰ The Jewish Autonomous Area did not meet any of these requirements (with the exception of perhaps the first one).

Stalin's personal position played an important role in putting on hold the projects of building a Jewish national state in the USSR. Ever since he wrote his article *Marxism and the Nationalities Issue* (1913) Stalin consistently expressed his doubts about the existence of a Jewish nation.⁴¹ When the Organizing Bureau of the CC of the RCP(b) in February 1921 rejected, by the votes of Stalin, Leonid Serebryakov and Mikhail Tomskey, the proposal of the Central Bureau of the Jewish section to call an All-Russia Conference of Nonparty Jewish Workers, the Secretary of the Central Bureau of the RCP(b) Jewish section, Aleksandr Chemerissky saw this as "not only a failure (by Stalin.—*M.A.*) but a reluctance to understand the gist of the matter": "in the speech of Comrade Stalin—...forever a representative of the so-called Turkic peoples... a metaphysical question cropped up whether Jews were a nation. Comrade Stalin has no doubt that Mari are a nation," Chemerissky wrote to Lenin.⁴² Because Stalin saw the future of Russian Jews in their assimilation, he agreed with the implementation of plans to create Jewish territorial entities only to the extent that it helped to solve other national tasks: to fight Jewish poverty within the Western borders of the USSR ("the Crimean—*KomZET* plan") or to strengthen the Far Eastern borders of the Soviet state (the Birobidzhan project).

In his later years Bragin worked as director of the Soya and Industrial Crops Institute at *VASKhNIL* (All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences). He was arrested in Moscow on December 2, 1937 and executed on February 10, 1938, accused of spying. Bragin was rehabilitated on November 12, 1955. Like other repressed leaders of *OZET*, Abram Bragin was a victim of contradictions of Stalin's nationalities policy which, on the one hand, successfully used the national feelings of the Jewish intelligentsia in territorial and national development of the

poorest Jewish masses, and on the other hand, tolerated only nominal sovereignty of the national union and autonomous republics, autonomous areas within what was essentially a unitary nation-state.

NOTES

- 1 “The majority of Jews lost more than they gained from the revolution,” wrote the Chairman of the Central Bureau of the RCP(b) Jewish Section Semyon (Shimon) Dimanshteyn. “If we look at the overall position of Jews in the boroughs (*shtetls*) before the revolution and today, 15-20% are better off after the revolution, 30% are in the same situation and 50% have seen their situation worsen. The mass of Jews lived by crafts and trade, and now this has been taken away from them... the Jewish population in *shtetls* is dying out and young people engage in contraband.” The Russian State Archive of Sociopolitical History (*RGASPI*), stock 17, inv. 60, file 832, p. 27. There was an alarmingly large number of Jews “stripped of their civil rights.” Thus in 1924 Byelorussia, which was the home of 15.7% of the total Jewish population of the USSR (in terms of ratio to the population of individual republics, the Byelorussians occupied the first place with 8.2%, compared with 5.4% in Ukraine and 0.5% in the RSFSR). The Jews stripped of their civil rights accounted for as many as 32.5% of the total Jewish population in Byelorussia. *Jews. Pages of History*, Moscow, 1997, pp. 249-250 (in Russian).
- 2 Thus, at the 15th Congress of the AUCP(b) alternate member of the CC Politburo and People’s Commissar of External and Internal Trade of the USSR, Anastas Mikoyan, presented a report on the national composition of the Soviet State *Apparat*. His main conclusion: “We see that the top is local, but the majority of the staff are Russian. Therefore all talk about Jewish preponderance, etc. is groundless.” “The Soviet Government Apparatus in Figures”, *Pravda*, 11 Dec. 1927.
- 3 *RGASPI*. stock 151, inv. 1, file 43, p. 4.
- 4 *Ibid.* stock 495, inv. 3, file 123, pp. 8-9.
- 5 *Charter of the All-Union Society for the Allocation of Land to the Working Jews in the USSR (OZET)*, Moscow, 1928, p. 4 (in Russian).
- 6 I. Stalin, “The Nationalities Issue and Leninism: Reply to Comrades Meshkov, Kovalchuk and Others,” *Works*, vol. 11, Moscow, 1949, pp. 338-340 (in Russian).
- 7 A. Bragin, M. Koltsov, *The Fate of Jewish Masses in the Soviet Union*, Moscow, 1924; Yu. Golde, *Allocation of Land to Working Jews*, Moscow, 1925, M. Kalinin, P. Smidovich, *On the Allocation of Land to Working Jews in the USSR*, Moscow, 1927; Yu. Larin, *Jews and Anti-Semitism in the USSR*, Moscow—Leningrad, 1929 (all in Russian).
- 8 G. Aronson, *The Jewish Question Under Stalin. A Book About Russian Jewry: 1917-1967*, Jerusalem—Moscow—Minsk, 2002, pp. 142-169; S. Shvarts, *Birobidzhan*, *ibid.*, pp. 170-213; Z. Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics. The Jewish Section of the CPSU 1917-1930*, Princeton, 1972.
- 9 A. Kuchenbecker, *Zionismus ohne Zion. Birobidzan: Idee und Geschichte eines jüdischen Staates in Sowjetisch Fernost*, Berlin, 2000.
- 10 G. Kostyrchenko, *Stalin’s Secret Policy: Power and Anti-Semitism*, Moscow, 2001, p. 138 (in Russian).
- 11 *The First All-Union Congress of OZET in Moscow. Transcript*, Moscow, 1927, p. 65 (in Russian).

- 12 “Bragin, Abram Grigoryevich,” *The New Soviet Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, Moscow, 1927 (in Russian).
- 13 V. Khiterer, “A. Bragin’s Memorandum on the Worsening Economic Position of the Jewish Population in the USSR (1922),” *Bulletin of the Moscow Jewish University*, vol. 1, 1995, p. 215 (in Russian).
- 14 A. Bragin, M. Koltsov, *The Fate of Jewish Masses in the Soviet Union*, p. 11.
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- 27 *Ibid.*, file 82, pp. 57, 61.
- 28 *Ibid.*, file 86, pp. 28-30ob.
- 29 *Ibid.*, file 162, p. 118.
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- 33 Yu. Larin, op. cit., p. 308.
- 34 R. Weinberg, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland: an Illustrated History, 1928-1996*, Berkeley, 1998.
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- 36 A. Melikhov, *Birobidzhan: the Promised Land*, Moscow, 2009, pp. 204-205 (in Russian).
- 37 *RGASPI*, stock 82, inv. 2, file 1308, p. 46.
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- 39 Ibid., stock 272, inv. 1, file 462, p. 1. “Palestinian Pavilion” at the Exhibition was flying two flags, a red one and a white-blue one (the official flag of the state of Israel since 1948). The “Palestinian delegation” was led by the Secretary General of Histadrut, leader of the “proletarian Zionism” and the future first Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion—*RGASPI*, stock 272, inv. 1, file 462, p. 9.
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