Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region (Jewish Encounters Series)

Masha Gessen
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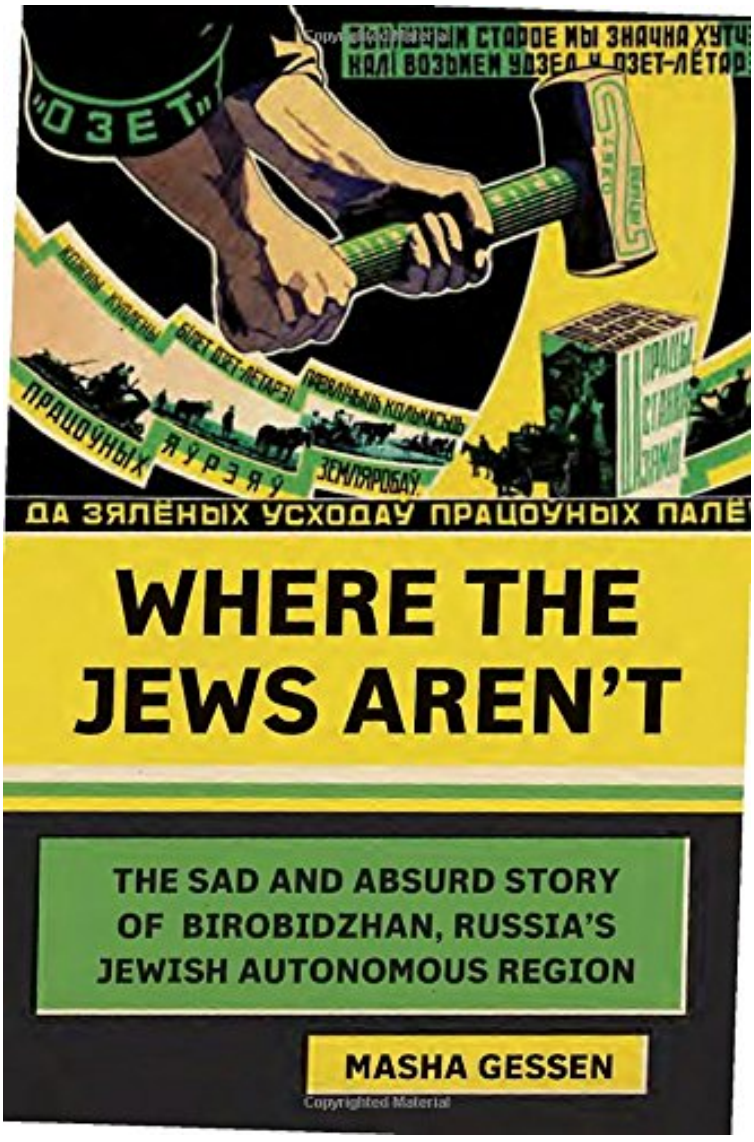

#373544 in Books Gessen Masha 2016-08-23 2016-08-23Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.50 x 2.00 x 7.20l, 1.25 #File Name: 0805242465192 pagesWhere the Jews Aren t The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan Russia s Jewish Autonomous Region | File size: 63.Mb

Masha Gessen : Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region (Jewish Encounters Series) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region (Jewish Encounters Series):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. This book is well written with a personal touch, not just a historic account.By Dmitry KrupitskyThis book is well written with a personal touch, not just a historic account. It answered my questions why and how Birobidzhan was first established. Why and how did it fail? Well, I could guess ... I have personal experiences ...Recommendation: do not read the last section before going to sleep. I was chased by Stalin's cronies in my nightmares. They did not listen what I had to say to defend myself.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Another sad story of persecution based upon ones religionBy Ronald F. PrebishA comprehensive review of the "city that never truly became a city" Having first come across this story in a book by Marek Halter I found this further excursion into a world most people to this day do not know existed was another testimony about the brutality of man to his fellow man. Another sad story of persecution based upon ones religion. History never exactly repeats itself but often times it just perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices against people who are just trying to make their own way in a hostile world.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Gripping!By HoneybeeA grim, and well-written account of the rarely-told history of Jews in the Soviet Union, with remarkable insights into the conflicting ideas and lives, of Jews who remained in the USSR long after many of our ancestors left for the west.

From the acclaimed author of The Man Without a Face, the previously untold story of the Jews in twentieth-century Russia that reveals the complex, strange, and heart-wrenching truth behind the familiar narrative that begins with pogroms and ends with emigration.In 1929, the Soviet government set aside a sparsely populated area in the Soviet Far East for settlement by Jews. The place was called Birobidzhan.The idea of an autonomous Jewish region was championed by Jewish Communists, Yiddishists, and intellectuals, who envisioned a haven of post-oppression Jewish culture. By the mid-1930s tens of thousands of Soviet Jews, as well as about a thousand Jews from abroad, had moved there. The state-building ended quickly, in the late 1930s, with arrests and purges instigated by Stalin. But after the Second World War, Birobidzhan received another influx of Jewsthose who had been dispossessed by the war. In the late 1940s a second wave of arrests and imprisonments swept through the area, traumatizing Birobidzhans Jews into silence and effectively shutting down most of the Jewish cultural enterprises that had been created. Where the Jews Arent is a haunting account of the dream of Birobidzhanand how it became the cracked and crooked mirror in which we can see the true story of the Jews in twentieth-century Russia.(Part of the Jewish Encounters series)

Gessen tells a poignant tale in Where the Jews Arent. The books most memorable sections are Gessens ruminations on homelessness as experienced by her own generation of Russian Jews, [which] helps her better appreciate the yearnings of the supporters of perhaps the worst good idea ever. Steven J. Zipperstein, The New York Times Book Gessen has the subtlety, honesty and tragic sensibility necessary to take a period and a society that are dripping in cruel irony, and to tell her stories with great affect, without being treacly or preachy. HaaretzAccessible.Gessen traces the grim story of Birobidzhan, a region in the desolate Soviet Far East where Jews were granted autonomy and an opportunity to escape their harsh existence of poverty, discrimination, terror, and non belonging in Soviet Russia. The hopes were never realized, however, and the venture turned out to be a tale of concentrated tragic absurdity.Gessen ably tells one of the 20th centurys most chilling stories of struggle, perseverance, and despair. Publishers Weekly Moscow-bornGessen addresses the story of the Jewish struggle for autonomy in Stalins Russia. With no reason given, the Russian government decided that Jews, along with other ethnic groups like the Koreans, should be granted their freedom in an out-of-the-way spot along the Chinese border. Birobidzhan was one of the worlds two Jewish states, a place with a Yiddish language newspaper but no Yiddish-speaking residents. As the author tells of the formation of the settlement in 1934, she describes life as a Russian Jew. Even though she left when she was 12, Gessen ably explores the mindset of those before her who lived through the time.Though the narrative offers a depressing picture of Russian Jews, it is packed with wonderful stories of strength, intelligence, and impressive perseverance. KirkusThroughout this concise and engaging book, Gessen strives to offer the story of Birobidzhan as idea, location, and experience. Gessens winding journey toward seeing herself as part of a people who were and are offers the reader a rich primary source about a still ongoing process of post-Soviet Jews gaining awareness of the Soviet Jewish experience. The ForwardThis brief though complex book provides an illuminating chronicle of an under-examined area of 20th-century Jewish history. Library JournalAbout the AuthorMASHA GESSENs previous books include The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy and the national best seller The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin. She has immigrated to the United States twiceonce, as a teenager, from the Soviet Union and again, more than thirty years later, from Putins Russia. She lives in New York City.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.- 1 -The man who made Birobidzhan famous had the gift of knowing when to run. That he lived into his late sixties is testament to his outstanding survival instincts. On his sixty-eighth birthday, he was shot to death, a final victim of the centurys most productive executioner. He had been a writer who preferred to leave his stories ragged and open-ended, but his own life, which ended on what became known as the Night of the Murdered Poets, had a sinister rhyme and roundness to it.David Bergelson was born on August12, 1884, in the village of Okhrimovo, a Ukrainian shtetl so small there might be no record of it now if it were not for Bergelsons association with it. Three and a half years before his birth, Czar Alexander II was assassinated by a group of young revolutionaries that counted one Jew, a woman, among them.

Five persons were hanged for the crime, but it was the Jews of Russia who bore the brunt of the national rage. After some years of acquiring greater rights and freedoms, as well as hope, the Jews found the law closing in on them, herding them back into the shtetlach. Pogroms swept through the Pale, brutalizing the enlightened modern Russian-speaking Jews along with their traditional parents. Into this bleak, dangerous world came the surprise ninth child of an older couple.The parents were rich and pious. Bergelsons father, a grain and timber merchant, spoke no Russian; he belonged to the last generation of Jews who could achieve wealth, success, and prominence entirely within the confines of the Yiddish-speaking world. His wife was younger and of a different sphere: a cultured woman, a reader. David Bergelsons education was an unsuccessful attempt to merge his parents worlds. He was tutored by a maskila product of the Jewish enlightenment movementwho taught him to speak and write in Russian and Hebrew, in addition to his native Yiddish, but not, as the young Bergelson found out later, well enough to enable him to be admitted to an institution of higher learning. His father died when David was a little boy, his mother when he was fourteen, and Davids wanderings commenced. Losing ones anchorsand any sense of homeis essential for developing an instinct for knowing when its time to run.The teenager left the shtetl and stayed, by turns, with older siblings in the big cities of Kyiv, Warsaw, and Odessa, subsidizing their hospitality out of his share of the family inheritance. He had a home, and a family, only so long as he could pay for them. This is another good lesson. One always has to pay to belong, and to have a roof over ones head.One thing Bergelson seems to have always known about himself was that he was a writer. Any young writer must find his language, but rarely is the choice as literaland as difficultas it was for Jews writing in the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the cities between which Bergelson was moving, he was surrounded by Yiddish, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Lithuanian speech. His command of these languages ranged from poor to limited. Then there was Hebrew, the language of his fathers prayers and a new movements dreams; as a teenager, Bergelson went through a period of fascination with the work of Nachman Syrkin, the founder of Labor Zionism. (Syrkin himself wrote in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German, and English.) Bergelson tried writing in Hebrew and failedit may be that his command of it was insufficient for writing, or it could be that the language, in his hands, did not lend itself to the modernism he was attempting. He switched to Russian, but this expansive language failed him, too, perhaps because he wanted to write stark, sparse prose and Russian demanded flowery vagueness. He finally found his voice in his long-dead fathers living language, Yiddish.A century later, when a crop of new academics rediscovered Bergelson, they would call his fictional characters plastic, which is not only unfair but misleading. I have only an inkling, based on my own experience of being a stranger in a strange land, but I imagine that his characters are people as he saw them. The women were inscrutable, impulsive, unfair, inexplicably generous at times and unexpectedly cold at others. The men were lonely and displaced. They lived in their imaginations because they had no home and no interlocutor in the physical world. They waited for the future to happen, for a door to open and let them out into that world, but the world comprised only dead-end streets and circular roads that always led back to themselves and the ghosts they carried with them. His main characters invariably lived in a lone house outside of town, or spent their days in the woods, or walked around speaking to dead friends in their heads. When the plot suddenly broke the loneliness of one of his male characters, Bergelsons narrative focus would immediately shift away from him, to a darker, more desolate character. Could he not imagine companionship that can assuage loneliness? His second novel literally ended where the conversation between its male and female protagonists finally began.No one wanted to publish that. The world of Yiddish fiction had grown lively and even crowded by the time Bergelson attempted to enter it, but it expected the very opposite of the young writers desolate prose. Editors either rejected his work out of hand or sat on it for months, apparently at a loss. He had to insert himself into the Yiddish literary world personally in order to get things moving. He started making runs to Warsaw, the seat of the reigning kings of Yiddish literature. He showed up on editors doorsteps to get their attention. He finally underwrote part of the cost of publishing his first book. The novel came out in 1909, when Bergelson was twenty-five, the result of five years not so much of writing as of striving to stake his place in the Jewish literary scene.When a man has no home but a great need of belonging, he must build his own world. This is the secret of the outcast, the migr, the wandering Jew. Bergelson started shuttling between Warsaw, Wilna, and Kyiv, each city a focal point of Jewish culture. He became the center of the Kyiv Group, which included the Yiddish-language writers Der Nister, Leyb Kvitko, and Dovid Hofshteyn.These writers lives would intersect with Bergelsons for longer than would seem physically or historically possible. Der Nister was Bergelsons precise peer (they were in their twenties when they met); he had started out writing poetry in Hebrew but had never published a word of it. Then he switched from poetry to prose, from Hebrew to Yiddish, and from his given name to the pseudonym, which means the Hidden One. His political sympathies ran to the Labor Zionists and the Territorialists, who believed that a land ought to be found for the Jews somewhere, not necessarily in the Levant but certainly away from the czars and their pogroms. Dovid Hofshteyn, five years younger than Bergelson, hailed from an unusual secular family: his father was a maskil, his mother a klezmer musician, his sister a Yiddish poet. Dovid himself began writing poetry as a child, in Hebrew, Russian, and Ukrainian, and brought all these languages to his membership in the Yiddish writers brotherhood. Politically, he was a revolutionary. Leyb Kvitko was six years younger, which qualified him as Bergelsons protg: he joined the Kyiv Group by correspondence from the Ukrainian city of Uman, where he published a handwritten journal in Yiddish, and later

moved to the big city, to a big literary welcome in the small Yiddish-language circle.These writers knew something about language that few others know. Even before my parents finally persuaded each other to leave the Soviet Union, I grew up hearing and reading a single lament. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the biggest tragedy of emigration was the loss of language. Writers lost their readers, the story went, and they lost their ability to write: they lost their tongue. This was demonstrably not true. In fact, most writers my family knew and virtually all writers we read could not be officially published in the Soviet Union; my parents and uncounted other reader-distributors typed their work up on loud German-made manual typewriters, which produced a maximum of four carbon-paper copies, if the paper was thin and the stroke was heavy. Many of them, when they mustered the courage to leave the country or were forced out, found houses in the West that were willing to publish them in both Russian and other languages, found larger audiences, teaching gigs, and, in a few cases, even found fame. But my literary-critic mother and her friends and colleagues held to the gospel that one could write in one language and one language only, and that this language stayed alive only as long as the writer lived among people who spoke it. This meant that if we left the country, I could not become a writer.I accepted this truth and, upon crossing the Soviet border, gave up all ambition of becoming a writer. I went to college to study architecture, dropped out, and backed into writing awkwardly and disbelievingly. The first language I was published in was English, but for decades I generally refused to read my writing in public because then I could hear my own accent. Latermuch later, it seemed, after I had finally grown to believe that I was a writeran entire generation of Russian Jewish migrs writing in English came on the scene, as though they and their writing were the most logical things in the world. I found that I especially liked those of them who, like Anya Ulinich or Lara Vapnyar, not only spoke with an accent but also wrote with one.It wasnt until long after that, not until I was working on this book, that I realized that Jewish writers had been making conscious choices about their writing language for more than a century. My mother had talked about language as though it were an immutable characteristic, a right or a burden bestowed at birth. I think she was speaking from both literature and experience. She had grown up behind the Iron Curtain, with pooroften laughably poorlanguage instruction, and it was only her extraordinary ability and perseverance that had enabled her to learn eight foreign languages well enough to read them but, certainly, never to write in them. Russian migr writers whose works reached her lamented their lack of access to the living language, which affirmed her view of the lands beyond Soviet borders as some sort of a linguistic desert.But the Jewish writers who grew up in the Russian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century were steeped in many living languages. Hebrew was the language of their studies and, for many of them, of their wildest dreams. Yiddish was the language of their homes and, more often than not, their streets. It also turned out to be the best language for describing what went on and what was said, sung, and felt in those streets. Russian was the language of higher education and secular discussion. A writer may have sought his language, and even found it, but more often he made a decision about the language depending on the topic, the context, and the audience. He might reshape a pieceor a bookoriginally rendered in Russian when rewriting it for an audience that would read it in Hebrew. Some readers would receive the piece twice, differently.