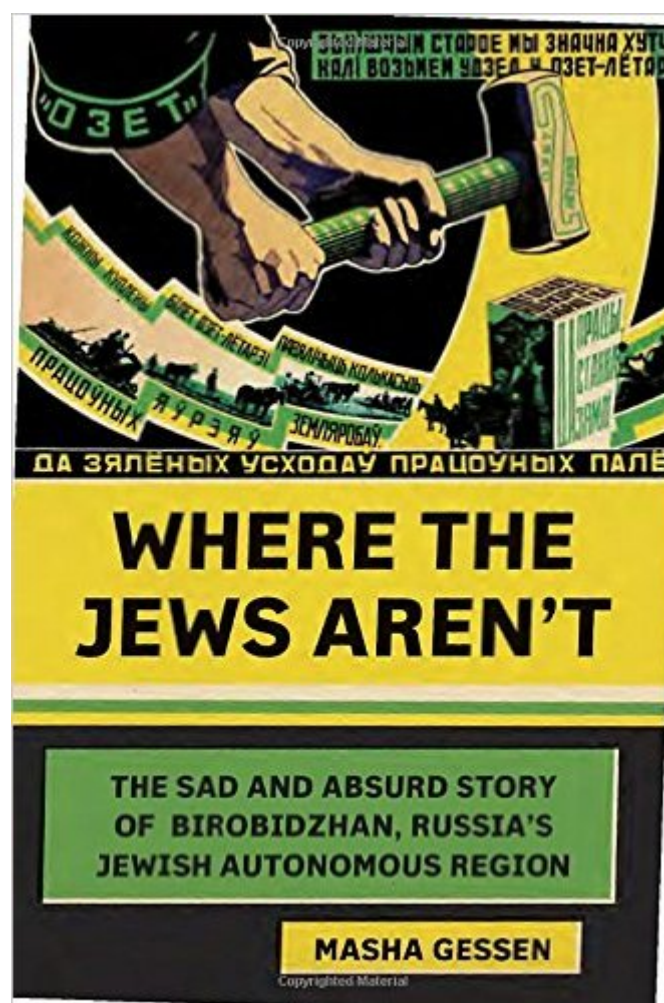


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# Where The Jews Aren't: The Sad And Absurd Story Of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region (Jewish Encounters Series)



## Synopsis

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 Jews—those who had been dispossessed by the war. In the late 1940s a second wave of arrests and imprisonments swept through the area, traumatizing Birobidzhan's Jews into silence and effectively shutting down most of the Jewish cultural enterprises that had been created. *Where the Jews Aren't* is a haunting account of the dream of Birobidzhan—and 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)

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I love history and I enjoy reading anything about "minorities" as they aren't usually covered extensively in history books. And while I'm aware of the Holocaust, the eastern European pogroms

against the Jews, and then later Stalin's purging of the Jews, this little book puts one community of Jews in focus to better understand the big picture. Masha Gessen's own Jewish ancestry in Moscow also adds a personal touch to the story. The center of the story is David Bergelson, a passionate Jewish Bolshevik who loved all things Yiddish. At one point he's described as the "Maxim Gorky of the Jews." He was a writer and wanted to make a living writing Yiddish articles. It seemed the only place that would publish him was in Russia, but it wasn't a fast nor an easy way to make a name for himself. Gessen portrays him as horribly flawed (and he was), because to Bergelson it wasn't just important being Jewish, one had to speak and live the Yiddish way. That turned many other Jews, especially those in the United States, off. Bergelson's story is a fascinating one and Gessen makes it quite readable. She also weaves the important history behind the creation, and then destruction, of a Jewish autonomous region the young Bolshevik nation was planning to send off the Jews: a harsh, infertile mountainous region near Manchuria, where biting insects and harsh weather kept most people away. The region, Birobidzhan, was named after two bordering Rivers, the Bira and the Bidzhur. The narrative covers a good portion of the 1920s and 1930s, when depression hits the world and where Jews in Germany were forced to leave and stripped of their citizenship.

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