PART THREE

NEW SOURCES ON RUSSIAN JEWISH INFLUENCES IN MUSIC, ART AND PUBLISHING
If Moscow Were Paris: Russia, the Soviet Union and Birobidzhan as Points of Reference in the Yiddish Press of Paris

Agnieszka W. Wierzcholska

‘Once Moscow becomes a second artistic Paris, all artists will live in Moscow—and I will be the first among them.’1 It was Marc Chagall who conceived of such an intriguing possibility in an interview for the Yiddish weekly Pariz published in the French capital in April 1935. What if Moscow were to emerge as a second Paris? It seems as if Marc Chagall articulated a wish in the quoted interview and as if he expected his reader to understand his reference to Moscow immediately. Was there—among the Eastern European Jewish immigrants—an imagined but nevertheless vital axis between Moscow and Paris, as suggested by Chagall’s words? The potential readers of the Yiddish press in Paris were immigrants from Eastern Europe who had left their old home countries behind. For the most part, they experienced different trajectories, saw the fall of empires and the emergence of smaller East-Central European states after World War I, migrated through Europe and beyond, before arriving in Paris. What was their point of reference and how was it discussed in the Yiddish press? Did an immaterial line between Paris and the abandoned country serve to compare the old and the new, chosen ‘homeland’? Did Moscow and more generally Russia or the Soviet Union become a point of reference, in the sense that referring back to this point would allow the affirmation of one’s identity and cultural continuity? The articles in the Yiddish press convey a conglomeration of different notions, concepts, and connotations associated with Russia. The Yiddish publicists in Paris constructed an image of Russia and the Soviet Union, and the land gradually became a field of projections. When analyzing the discourse about Russia and

1 ‘Vi nor Moskve vet vern a tsvayt kinstlerish Pariz, weln ale kinstler lebn in moskve, un ikh—der ershter’; ‘Bey Marc Chagall: Krizis in der yidishn kunst’, Pariz, 12 April 1935, 5 (all citations in English are translations from Yiddish made by the author of the paper).