TO: Area Directors and Executive Assistants
FROM: Isaiah Terman
SUBJECT: Press release round-up re: AJC representatives on Birobidjan, etc.

The attached release is being sent to the English-Jewish papers and to editorial writers of the general press; also to chapter chairmen.

In a day or two, you will have a memorandum from S. Andhil Fineberg concerning these recent events.

We are considering a press montage of significant articles on this subject. How many copies would you want?
New York, January 15...Anastas I. Mikoyan, Soviet First Deputy Premier, denied to American Jewish Committee leaders here this week reports of a Soviet plan for the large-scale movement of Soviet Jews to Birobidzhan in Siberia.

Meeting with Mr. Mikoyan and Soviet Ambassador Mikhail A. Menshikov at the one and three-quarter hour luncheon conference at the Carlyle Hotel were: Former Senator Herbert H. Lehman, Honorary Vice-President of the Committee; Irving M. Engel, President of the Committee; Jacob Blaustein, Honorary President, and Ralph Friedman, Chairman, AJC Foreign Affairs Committee.

At a press conference following the meeting the Committee Delegation declared that it was authorized by Soviet Deputy Premier Mikoyan to say that "the reported plan for the creation of a 'Jewish State' in Birobidzhan and the large scale transfer of the Jewish population in Russia to that area is without foundation."

Commenting on Mr. Mikoyan's denial, Committee President Irving M. Engel said: "We are gratified, but the answer does not necessarily satisfy us; there is a difference between being gratified and satisfied."

Jacob Blaustein, Honorary President, described the session as "amiable but serious." Mr. Lehman reported that in addition to the Birobidzhan issue, other Jewish problems in the Soviet Union were discussed.

This was the first and only meeting that Deputy Premier Mikoyan held with representatives of an American Jewish organization. The 52-year-old Committee is the pioneer human relations organization.
in this country, combating bigotry, protecting the civil and religious rights of Jews and advancing the cause of human rights everywhere.

Principle subjects discussed at the meeting were the situation of the estimated three million Jews in the Soviet Union, their cultural and religious institutions, their status, minority rights and related matters. Specifically, the Committee expressed grave concern to the Soviet Deputy Premier regarding a report from its Paris office that a large-scale movement of Soviet Jews to Birobidzhan might be proposed to the Soviet Communist Party Congress opening January 27 in Moscow.

Following the meeting, the Committee released a detailed memorandum which it had forwarded to Mr. Mikoyan, listing suppression of every phase of Jewish activity in the Soviet Union.

The document charged discrimination against Soviet Jews in the economic, social, educational and religious areas. It called attention to the elimination of Jewish schools, the absence of Hebrew and Yiddish publications and the suppression of religious and cultural institutions. The document revealed that only 60 rabbis "serve an estimated Jewish population of three million."

The memorandum said that ten years ago, Jewish students constituted eleven per cent of the student body at the University of Minsk. Today, it added, Jewish graduates at the university constituted only two per cent.

At the luncheon meeting, the Committee leaders presented a statement to Mr. Mikoyan noting that the reports of a possible movement of Soviet Jews to Birobidzhan "have not been refuted by any responsible Soviet source." It added:

"Today Jews constitute only one-fifth of the population of this so-called 'autonomous Jewish region' in which almost all expressions of Jewish cultural life, such as schools, theatres and publishing houses, have been suppressed.

"The renewal of the scheme would, therefore, be completely devoid of any incentive to/ enormous sacrifices and burdens involved."
Birobidzhan was established by the Soviet Union in 1928, primarily as a Soviet alternative to Palestine for Jews wishing a Jewish homeland. The number of Jews who moved there was never more than a fraction of the 3,000,000 Jews in the Soviet Union.

The American Jewish Committee estimates the present population of Birobidzhan at 180,000, with only about 35,000 Jews.

Following is the full text of the Committee statement on the reported Soviet Birobidzhan proposal:

Recent published reports from reliable sources indicate that at the forthcoming Twenty-first Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union next January, a renewed plan for the settlement of a large number of Jewish citizens of that country in the so-called "Autonomous Jewish Religion" of Birobidzhan will be presented. These reports have not been refuted by any responsible Soviet source.

The history of the original Birobidzhan settlement itself presages the failure of any attempt directed at further voluntary resettlement. The fundamental right of the individual to preserve or to change his dwelling place and cultural environment in accordance with his own needs and aspirations has been sanctioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The basic obstacle with regard to Birobidzhan consists in the inherent artificiality of the idea of settling an urban European element in a primitive Asian area adjacent to the Chinese border, to which no historic, sociological and spiritual ties bind them. Spontaneous interest in this kind of project can only be very sporadic at best. In the case of Birobidzhan, even the last traces of such interest have been wiped out by the failure of the original scheme, and particularly by the repeated purges, in 1937-39 and 1948-53, of its Jewish leaders.

Today, Jews constitute only one-fifth of the population of this so-called "Autonomous Jewish Region" in which almost all expressions of Jewish cultural life such as schools, theatres, publishing houses, have been suppressed. The renewal of the scheme would, therefore, be completely devoid of any incentive for Jews to accept voluntarily the enormous sacrifices and burdens involved.
This means that if the project is undertaken in the absence of genuine interest on the part of Jews, it can clearly be carried out only by means of overt or covert complusion.

Regarding the nature of compulsory transfers of populations, there should be no difference of opinion. In his Special Report to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mr. Khrushchev himself stated:

"... more monstrous are the acts whose initiator was Stalin and which are rude violations of the basic Leninist principles of the nationality policy of the Soviet state. We refer to the mass deportations from their native places of whole nations, together with all Communists and Komsomols, without any exception..."

The American Jewish Committee urges that no transfers of populations by compulsion, direct or indirect, of Jews or others be undertaken in the Soviet Union; that, in particular, Jewish citizens of that country will not be forced by open or disguised pressure to leave their present homes, and that, above all, only such proposals be entertained for the future of Soviet Jewry as are entirely compatible with the exercise of free choice by the individual.

We sincerely trust that the disturbing reports will prove unfounded and that such measures, if contemplated, will not be undertaken by the Soviet authorities.