Shortly after the Russian revolutions of 1917 that removed the tsars and brought in the Communist commissars, the saying arose that the camera was the most important weapon the Bolsheviks had at their fingertips. Vladimir Lenin and other Communist leaders recognized the power of images and the modern media to transform people and society, and gave photography and film pride of place in Soviet culture.

Although photography had come to tsarist Russia in the mid-19th century, photojournalism—the notion of using a camera to document a society in motion—was new. Russian photojournalism got its start in 1905, as the first revolution broke out. Karl Bulla, Yakov Shteinberg, and Pyotr Otsup all used relatively portable cameras to photograph the struggle that began the downfall of the tsars. And not coincidentally, many of the early founders of Soviet photojournalism were Jewish. Like the story of Hollywood being built by immigrant Jews from New York, the Russian photojournalism and film movements were driven by an entrepreneurial group of young Jews, who took advantage of new media to build careers for themselves.

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In 1923, a young Jewish photographer named Semyon Fridlyand moved to the capital of the emerging Communist empire, Moscow, from his war-torn home of Kiev, searching for work and a new life. He ended up on the doorstep of his cousin, Mikhail Koltsov (born Mikhail Fridlyand), kingpin of Soviet photojournalism and founder of Ogonyok (The Little Flame), the new country’s popular illustrated magazine that preceded its American equivalent, Life, by 13 years.

Koltsov, Fridlyand, and a host of other young photojournalists like Max Alpert, Georgy Zelma, and Mark Markov-Grinberg began developing what would eventually become Soviet photojournalism, a particular way of using the camera to document and envision Soviet society. In 1926, several upstart photography associations in Moscow mounted the first big photo exhibition in the Soviet Union—“10 Years of Soviet Photography.” Some critics have marked this as the peak of the great era of Soviet photography, as the show included a diversity of aesthetic and political approaches. Art photographers, who had their heyday in the last tsarist period of the 1910s, exhibited stunning naturalist photographs, nudes, and other classic themes of Russian art photography. Modernists, like Alexander Rodchenko and Boris Ignatovitch, showed how “socialist photography” could incorporate the aesthetic movements of architecture and literature, like Constructivism and Futurism. They envisioned the nascent Communist society through sharp angles, from great heights, or in close-ups so close that one could see the surface of a rock or the crags of an old woman’s face. It was at this exhibition that the new generation of photographers—people like Fridlyand—began their exhibition careers showing off a more realistic vision of Soviet society, but with a realism that in no way simply reflected what was in front of the camera.

These “Socialist Realist” photographers saw their task as elevating the Soviet experiment—by showing off the Soviet Union’s ethnic diversity, by making icons out of loyal workers, and by making agricultural labor
something of beauty. In his forty-year career Fridlyand used this new aesthetic form, known as Socialist Realism, to photograph every major moment in Soviet history, from industrialization and collectivization—which Joseph Stalin inaugurated to force Russian society into the future—to the building of a Soviet empire that stretched from the Pacific to the Baltic, and the Arctic to the Black Sea. He began his career working for Ogonyok and maintained a relationship with that important publication throughout his career. In 1930, Fridlyand became one of three photographers to exhibit as part of the first Soviet exhibition to travel abroad—"the Ogonyok exhibition"—and in the late 1930s he was one of the first to experiment with published color photography. He became one of the most important photojournalists in the country; some critics have gone as far as to say that Fridlyand introduced Socialist Realism to photography.

In addition to building the field of photojournalism and then using the camera to document the building of Soviet society, Soviet photographers were charged with the onerous and politically-motivated task of documenting the ethnic and physical diversity of the Soviet Union. Some have called this the National Geographic approach to photography—going from "the West" (in this case, ironically, Moscow), and moving "East" to photograph the Other in his "native habitat." But such anthropological approaches to photography do not fit Fridlyand and the Socialist Realist Soviet photojournalists so simply. One of the core values of the Soviet Union, especially in its early years, was that it was a state built upon ideas that bound together diverse people, albeit often through the use of force. From its earliest days, the government gave photographers assignments intended to project an image of diversity to the Soviet reading audience. Instead of emphasizing the distance between photographic subject and reader—much as National Geographic did—Fridlyand and others played with that distance to show how sameness and difference co-existed. Although the subjects may look different in terms of skin color, dress, and culture, they were all part of the "brotherhood of nations" that defined Soviet policy towards the country's ethnic diversity.

The challenge of envy was particularly resonant among the Jewish autonomists. Some of Fridlyand's earliest images for Ogonyok in 1936, the magazine's achievements issue, sent a message that the Jewish autonomists, who were themselves some of the key ideological journalists reflected in the photographs, laborers at work, and workers at play, perhaps suggesting howCommunist classes, traditionally or trade-oriented, posed problem-solving development of Jewish life to agriculture, productive industry, and a growing Soviet empire.

In June 1936, Nashi L'povnoe was published, an important article accompanied by images, each a Social Realist portrait of a new Soviet Jew. The article was written by the de facto czar of the Soviet Union, Mao Tse-tung, and featured in the daily newspaper Pravda. The article was a call to arms for the Jewish autonomists, warning them to stay within the bounds of the regime or face the consequences. The article was a turning point in the relationship between the Jewish autonomists and the Soviet government. The Jewish autonomists were forced to abandon their independent voice and conform to the dictates of the regime. The article was a wake-up call for the Jewish autonomists, reminding them of their place in the Soviet Union and the importance of obedience. The article was a reminder of the power of the regime and the importance of loyalty. The article was a reminder of the consequences of rebellion. The article was a reminder of the importance of photography in shaping the narrative of the Soviet Union.
The challenge of envisioning a Socialist empire was particularly resonant for Jewish photographers, who were themselves in the process of assimilation. Some of Fridlyand’s early attempts at documenting the Communist empire show his ambivalent stance. In 1936, the magazine Nashi Dostizheniiia (Our Achievements) sent him to photograph Birobidzhan, the Jewish autonomous region in the Soviet Far East that, according to official rhetoric, would transform Jews from places like Ukraine and Belorussia from small-town traders into manual-laboring members of the Soviet-Jewish nation. Productive labor was one of the key ideological visions of the new state, and journalists reflected this by photographing industrial plants, laborers at work and play, and other images to suggest how Communism liberated the working classes. Traditionally, Jews had occupied a market- or trade-oriented position in the economy of Russia, which posed problems for the new Soviet state. The development of Birobidzhan, and the moving of Jews to agriculture, was one attempt to make Jews productive and to build up the far reaches of the Soviet empire.

In June 1936, Nashi Dostizheniiia published an important article accompanied by nine Fridlyand images, each a Socialist Realist celebration of the new Soviet Jew. The journal was one of several established by the Soviet state in the 1930s that were overseen by the de facto cultural commissar, Maxim Gorky. By the 1930s, these new journals fused the visual with the textual and were geared towards the new Soviet intelligentsia, which had many Jews in its ranks—so many that one scholar has polemically argued that “in 1932, Jewish and Russian were virtually interchangeable.”

Fridlyand’s photograph of Jewish children living on a communal farm in Birobidzhan (p. 10) shows how Socialist Realism shaped the image of the empire. The children are, of course, happy—ecstatic in fact, especially the boy on the right. They smile away from the camera, almost gazing off into the distance. Although Socialist Realist photography would eventually move this gaze above the horizon, we see in this early photograph the movement from a direct gaze at the camera to some metaphoric future. In addition, these children—who represent Jews of the East—don’t conform to the image of either “the Jew” or the “person from the East.” In imagining photographs of Jews in the 1930s, one might have expected a more ethnographic photograph showing children in traditional religious clothing absorbed in prayer or study. Similarly, given the physical setting in the Soviet Far East, a reader might have imagined subjects who looked like other images of people from the East—darker skin, perhaps Asian in appearance, maybe even in clothing that didn’t conform to European expectations. These Jewish children shatter all such expectations.

A second photograph from Fridlyand’s Nashi Dostizheniiia photo essay (p. 44) shows an interaction between the “white” Jewish colonists and the native
Koreans. Unlike traditional colonial photography, which emphasized how the West uplifted the backward East, Fridlyand’s photography shows the Koreans and Jewish colonists in conversation with one another, each learning from the other. We know, in fact, from early reports by agronomists coming out of Birobidzhan, that Jewish settlers tried and failed to bring European farming techniques to the tundra of Birobidzhan, and ended up learning from the local Korean population how best to develop agriculture. In Fridlyand’s photography of Birobidzhan, the line between colonizer and colonized isn’t always clear.

Much of Fridlyand’s archive is made up of photographs of the Soviet Other—a young man from the Caucasus, a group of Mongolian schoolgirls learning to read, sheep farmers from the steppes of Russia, fishermen from the Soviet Far East. On the one hand, Fridlyand adopted traditional colonial strategies of showing the white ethnic Russian uplifting the native—what was commonly called in Western empire “the civilizing mission.” Unlike the Birobidzhan photos, in these more traditional colonial photographs the line between colonizer and colonized is clearer. For example, the photograph on page 41—a classic archetype of Socialist Realism—shows the ethnicized Soviet citizens, perhaps Mongolian or from somewhere else in the Far East, reading the central Communist Party newspaper, Pravda. Surrounding him are his fellow miners, cheering him on as he becomes a modern Socialist person by learning to read and by reading the proper newspaper. His gaze, however, tells even more. He does not look at his smiling comrades but at the slightly obscured white man in the foreground, presumably the bearer of the newspaper and, more metaphorically, of modernization and Socialism.

But in the Socialist empire, local cultures were not just meant to be modernized and Europeanized. They were also celebrated as a demonstration of Socialism’s commitment to the brotherhood of nations. Native cultures were elevated, celebrated, and also romanticized as authentic, as these working Turkmen women in costume show (above). What stands out in the 1930s photographs, which would have been published in a mainstream magazine like Ogonyok, are the women’s ethnic appearance and their deep red clothing. The red sky and the beige blanket color, red obviously present in the iconography, but the red garish red of Cosmopolis, warm red of “the East,” women’s clothing. By anthropological standards, the women wear a Soviet baht to the amazement of the empire, physical ties them to the larger Moscow, which has been managed by the empire. Photographers thus place that, on the one hand, it is the folk cultures and, on the other, learning to the “backwards”

This photographic tenor of the empire—Soviet Union’s own empire—a Socialist is to celebrate diverse cultur. And this ambivalent position, the Soviet Union have reflected Jews’—own status in that empire, own colonization. One critic of the photographers like I.
red clothing. The red stands out against the flat blue sky and the beige blanket on which they sit. As a color, red obviously plays a large role in Communist iconography, but the red in this photograph is not the garish red of Communism. Instead, it is a deep, warm red of “the East,” of oriental carpets and women’s clothing. By emphasizing the women’s ethnic appearance and their clothing, Fridlyand-celebrates and romanticizes their culture as authentic and rooted in place. However, one thing ruptures this ethnographic, almost National Geographic-style, photograph. The women have all been named “heroes of socialist labor,” and to mark their achievement they each wear a Soviet badge made of the Communist red. Even when Fridlyand photographs the farthest reaches of the empire, physically and metaphorically, he still ties them to the larger project of Socialism and to Moscow, which has bestowed this honor upon them. Photographers thus portrayed the Soviet empire as a place that, on the one hand, celebrated diversity and folk cultures and, on the other hand, brought European learning to the “backward” peoples of the empire.

This photographic tension in Fridlyand’s work reflects the Soviet Union’s own ambivalent stance as an empire—a Socialist paradise that tried to both celebrate diverse cultures and demand modernization. And this ambivalent photography-of-empire may also have reflected Jews—and Jewish photographers’—own status in that empire, as both colonizer and colonized. One critic has suggested that Soviet Jewish photojournalists like Fridlyand photographed the Soviet ethnic. Other precisely to make themselves—Jews from the provinces, remember—feel whiter and more Russian.” There is, of course, some truth to this. Being the translators of culture, from East to West, from center to periphery, gave Jews a lot of power, especially in Lenin’s world where the camera was as important a weapon as the gun. But this brings us back to Fridlyand’s Birobidzhan—a place of the East, populated by white Jews from the Ukraine who occupied a middle ground between colonizer and colonized. Only in the Birobidzhan photographs, in his photographs of the new Soviet Jew, do we see glimpses of Fridlyand—our Socialist Realist magician who transformed an impoverished reality into an iconic vision—looking in the mirror and wrestling with his role as the documenter of an ambivalent empire.