In 1931, at the height of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan, a young Jewish scholar named Yehoshu’a (Isaiah Mendelevich) Pul’ner (1900–1942) published a manifesto in the journal Soviet Ethnography. In “Questions on the Organization of Jewish Ethnographic Museums and Jewish Sections of Ethnographic Museums,” Pul’ner argued vehemently that Jews scattered throughout the Soviet Union did not constitute a unified group. The notion of “the Jewish people,” he claimed, was a ruse employed by Zionists and anti-Semites alike to advance their respective political agendas. In a similar fashion, “bourgeois” Jewish ethnography camouflaged the history of internal Jewish class conflict by emphasizing spiritual unity and solidarity in the face of external persecution. Soviet ethnography would expose these falsehoods by studying Jews in their local socioeconomic environments. Dividing the Jews of the Soviet Union into five distinct categories (Western, Georgian, Mountain/Dagestani, Crimean, and Central Asian/Bukharan), Pul’ner insisted that these sub-populations should be studied as extraterritorial members of the Soviet republics in which they dwelled.

Six years later, Pul’ner found himself presiding over an enterprise guided by diametrically opposing principles. In 1937, he was appointed to head a newly established Jewish Section at the State Museum of Ethnography (SME) in Leningrad. The SME’s educational mission was to enlighten Soviet citizens about the diverse peoples of the USSR and their socioeconomic and cultural transformation under Communism. It was structured along ethno-geographic lines, with major research and exhibition units devoted to Soviet republics. According to Pul’ner’s argument from 1931, the ethnographic representation of Soviet Jews should have been handled by these separate units. Archival sources indicate that the decision instead to place all Soviet Jews under one
conceptual rubric, regardless of whether they were inhabitants of Ukraine or Uzbekistan, city-dwellers or rural shepherds, was ultimately based on pragmatic financial and political calculations. Not least of the latter was the pressure museum curators faced to refute Nazi claims about the racial inferiority of the USSR’s multiethnic population. Confronted with the threat of the “fascist cannibals,” Pul’ner abandoned his original thesis and cast the disparate Jews of the Soviet Union as a cohesive group, with “Western” (Ashkenazi) Jews given the greatest prominence.

As pioneering scholarship has demonstrated in recent years, ethnographic science played a critical role in defining and legitimizing the Soviet state virtually since its inception. Following the Russian civil war, the Bolsheviks found themselves barely in control of a fragmenting multinational former empire. The regime reorganized the country along ethno-territorial lines and announced the establishment of a new anti-imperial order: the country’s minorities, previously held captive in the Tsarist “prison-house of peoples,” would be granted equality and cultural autonomy in a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Bolshevik nationality policy thus became the cornerstone of Soviet state-building. Non-Russians, including Jews, were not merely permitted but required to nurture their unique ethnic identities within the parameters of the slogan “national in form, socialist in content.” To facilitate this process, ethnographers were recruited to study the class dynamics of Soviet minority groups and gauge their advancement along the continuum of Marxist historical development. Soviet ethnographic museums, in turn, served as mass propaganda tools, educating Soviet citizens about the beneficial impact of Soviet Communism for countless nationalities.

Soviet Jews played multiple roles in this partnership of ethnography and state-building: as Bolshevik theorists and policymakers, as ethnographers who collaborated with the regime, and as objects of ethnographic study. Pul’ner’s scholarship provides a useful vantage point from which to explore the relationship of Jews and empire in its distinctively Soviet “anti-imperial” manifestation.

Born in a shtetl in the former Pale of Jewish Settlement, Pul’ner benefited from unprecedented opportunities for educational and professional advancement that opened to secular Jews after the February and October revolutions in 1917. In the mid-1920s, Pul’ner studied in Leningrad, the former imperial capital, under the guidance of renowned ethnographers L.Ia. Shternberg and V.G. Tan-Bogoraz. A specialist on the Jews of the Caucasus region, Pul’ner proved himself to be a scholar of unusual breadth, conducting fieldwork among Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi populations in Ukraine, Belorussia, and Georgia. While his museum activities emphasized the transition of Jews from the “old” to the “new” ways of life,
his research focused on study of traditional Jewish material culture, folk medicine, foodways, and beliefs concerning marriage, birth, and death. Indeed, archival records suggest that he was deeply influenced by the “bourgeois” ethnographer S. An-ski, who developed a massive Yiddish-language questionnaire about the Jewish life cycle for use during his famed expedition through the Pale of Settlement in 1912–1914. As a scholar well versed in pre-revolutionary ethnographic methodologies yet fully embedded in the Marxist-Leninist scientific establishment, Pul’ner serves as a critical figure, bridging Jewish intellectual circles of late Imperial Russia and the early Soviet period.

In his capacity as director of the Jewish Section at the SME from 1937 to 1941, Pul’ner promoted a Marxist-Leninist vision of Soviet Jews as de-Judaized members of a socialist “family of nations.” His archived correspondence with museum officials, however, reveals a preoccupation with salvaging remnants of traditional Jewish life and a profound dissatisfaction with the “underdevelopment” of Soviet Jewish ethnographic science. Tensions between Pul’ner’s identities as propagandist and scholar grew even more pronounced following the Soviet Union’s invasion of eastern Poland in September 1939. In internal memos, he characterized the annexed territories of “Western Ukraine” and “Western Belorussia” as ethnographically pristine fields for the study of traditional Jewry. Convinced that the inevitable process of Sovietization would quickly lead to Jewish assimilation in occupied Poland just as it had at home in the USSR, he begged SME officials in early June 1941 for funding to conduct fieldwork. The Nazi invasion just a few weeks later preempted his trip. Six months later, Pul’ner starved to death during the Siege of Leningrad.

Pul’ner became an ethnographer at a historically unique juncture, when Jews were simultaneously empowered and disenfranchised by the Bolshevik system. In studying his own co-ethnics, he participated in a form of state-sponsored auto-ethnography, documenting a process of social engineering in which he was himself implicated. Had he survived the war, he may very well have fallen victim to the Anticosmopolitan Campaign that disproportionately targeted the Soviet Jewish cultural elite in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Yet on the eve of World War II, the Jewish Section of the SME enjoyed the regime’s support and was slated for expansion under Pul’ner’s leadership. In this brief period, his ambiguous status as both an agent and object of Soviet empire-building at home and abroad manifested itself most acutely: As curator of the Jewish Section of the SME, he publicly championed the Sovietization of Jews while quietly deploiring the consequences of this cultural homogenization for ethnographic scholarship; though trained as a specialist on the Jews of the Caucasus region, he placed “Western” Jews at the center of the Jewish Section’s first and only major exhibit, “The Jews in Tsarist Russia and the USSR”; and while denouncing the “colonialist” legacy of pre-revolutionary ethnography, he recognized the Stalinist regime’s cynical annexation of eastern Poland as a precious opportunity to build up the Jewish Section’s collections. From his graduate school days in the 1920s to his untimely death in 1942, he moved skillfully between institutions and operated in multiple ideological registers. In this sense he was, perhaps, an exemplary “empire Jew,” but one who lived in an age when totalitarian ideologies were violently redefining the old imperial models.