1 Amerikanizm

> [Henry Ford] has the close-set, prickly eyes of a peasant. As a matter of fact, he looks like a sharp-nosed Russian peasant, a genius inventor, who unexpectedly shaved off his beard and donned an English suit.
>
> Ilf and Petrov, *Low-Rise America*

As the Bolsheviks began constructing a new socialist order, they represented the United States as both a foil and a prototype of the socialist future. The Soviet press predicted the revolutionary demise of the land of capitalism, with its unfettered wealth, unremitting poverty, and violent racism. But it also promoted a veritable cult of *Amerikanizm*. The builders of socialism aimed to do more than borrow advanced American technology; they wanted to learn American *tekhnika*. Often translated as "technique," tekhnika conjured up uniquely American know-how, efficiency, practicality, ingenuity, and energy.[1] In 1924, Stalin expressed his commitment to American tekhnika in an aphorism endlessly quoted during the industrialization drive of the next decade: "The combination of Russian revolutionary sweep with American efficiency is the essence of Leninism in Party and state work."[2] Understood in this way, Amerikanizm had the potential not only to speed the tempo of work and modernize Soviet industry but also to produce a modern socialist society and modern Soviet people. As the Austrian writer René

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[1] Jeffrey Brooks, "The Press and Its Message: Images of America in the 1920s and 1930s," in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites, eds., *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 235; Kendall E. Bailes, "The American Connection: Ideology and the Transfer of American Technology to the Soviet Union, 1917–41," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (January 1981): 421; Alan M. Ball, *Imagining America: Influence and Images in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 145–53.

[2] Josef Stalin, "The Foundations of Leninism," Stalin Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/foundations-leninism/ch09.htm (accessed 5 July 2021); Hans Rogger, "*Amerikanizm* and the Economic Development of Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (July 1981): 385.

Fülop-Miller observed in the late 1920s, “industrialized America, for the Bolsheviks, became the Promised Land.”[3]

Nothing more clearly captures the paradoxical nature of the Soviet cult of Amerikanizm than its worship of the archetypical capitalist Henry Ford.[4] When in the mid-1920s the American journalist Maurice Hindus returned to the Belorussian village that he had left in 1905, he was surprised to learn that America, which the Bolsheviks regarded as “the most capitalistic and most reactionary nation in the world,” was “universally idolized.” “Again and again,” he reported, “Soviet officials would say to me that Russia’s salvation lay in her ability to learn to do things in the American way, which is the best way.”[5] Soviet intellectuals and technical experts revered Ford “as a guide and teacher who can show them how to obtain the best results in the quickest time with the least outlay of capital and labor.” Russian peasants, enamored of their Fordson tractors, celebrated the automaker as the cleverest of inventors.[6] Ilf and Petrov’s account of their brief audience with the great man in Dearborn, Michigan, quoted in the epigraph, clearly followed in this tradition. Emphasizing Ford’s physical resemblance to a sharp-eyed peasant, they described one of the richest capitalists in America in homespun terms as an “amazing mechanic,” who “detests Wall Street,” and left them with the advice, “Don’t ever get into debt, and help one another.”[7] (Figure 1.1)

Overwhelmingly, the Soviet people who visited the United States in the 1930s came to study American technology.[8] In the initial period of normalized relations (the last quarter of 1933), the United States issued eighty-one visas to Soviet visitors. The most high-profile were cultural emissaries such as the ballet dancers Tatiana Vecheslova and Vachtang Chabukiani, who performed at Carnegie Hall in January 1934. The group also included a general manager of Intourist, the Soviet tourist bureau, and a handful of trade representatives, many of whom came with their wives, looking to sell everything from petroleum products to sausage casings. But the vast majority (sixty-three) were engineers and mechanics (all men), who traveled both to take delivery of already purchased

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[3] René Fülop-Miller as quoted in Marina L. Levitana, *“Russian Americans” in Soviet Film: Cinematic Dialogues between the US and the USSR* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 2.

[4] Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 146–49.

[5] Maurice Hindus, *Broken Earth* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), 41.

[6] Maurice Hindus, “Ford Conquers Russia,” *Outlook* 147 (29 June 1927): 280, 282.

[7] LGA, 102–103; OA, 135–36.

[8] A. Dana Hodgdon to Mr. Kelley, 7 July 1931, National Archives, College Park (NACP), Record Group (RG) 59, 811.111 Russian Students/20; State Department to American Consul Berlin, 21 July 1932, 811.111Russian Students/22.

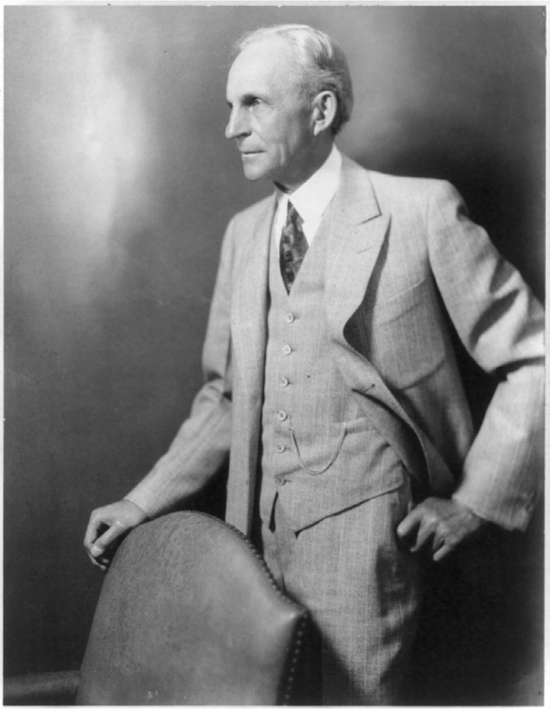

Figure 1.1 Henry Ford, c. 1934. Ilf and Petrov claimed that Ford looked like a sharp-nosed Russian peasant in an English suit.
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-78374.

equipment and to study American industry. The largest contingent, sixteen mechanics and engineers, were headed to training courses at the Ford Motor Company.[9]

To take advantage of the tantalizing business opportunities offered by Soviet interest in American technology, the US government put few restrictions on visiting engineers. After the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1933, American officials' concerns about economic and even military competition scarcely restricted Soviet procurement of American equipment. The War and Navy Departments usually registered "no objection" to the Soviet embassy's numerous requests on behalf of Soviet engineers for permission to visit sites connected with national security – airfields, aircraft manufacturers, munitions factories –

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[9] "Report on Applications for Non-immigrant Visas," 5 March 1934, NACP, RG 59, 811.111 U.S.S.R./396.

provided they occurred with twenty-four or forty-eight hours' notice.[10] Commercial agreements that included the long-term placement of Soviet engineers in factories fulfilling military contracts more frequently generated a "military objection."[11] However, as a 1936 dispute over Soviet personnel at Radio Corporation of America (RCA) plants demonstrates, a "military objection" did not necessarily constitute a veto.

In the RCA case, the Navy worried that the company's plan to host forty-six Soviet engineers, physicists, technicians, and mechanics for six months at its facilities in Camden and Harrison, New Jersey, might threaten national security.[12] Admiral W. H. Standley, the acting secretary of the Navy, explained to Secretary of State Cordell Hull that the "continuous presence" of a large number of Soviet citizens "at a plant where so much confidential naval work is in progress" would likely compromise "military secrecy." At the same time, he assured Hull that the Navy was "most anxious to avoid" any interference with "business relations."[13] As a workaround, the Navy determined that the breach of "military secrecy" involved was "not vital." While refusing to "sanction the prolonged visit of Russian nationals," the Navy would permit RCA to continue work on military contracts at the plants in question.[14] RCA's lawyers rejected this solution; the company was unwilling "to violate the Navy rule" even with assurances that the Navy would not punish the violation.[15] Company officials cautioned that they might have no choice but to "terminate the stay of the Russian Nationals" despite the possible "international consequences."[16]

Anxiety about these "international consequences" pushed Hull to intervene on RCA's behalf with the secretary of the Navy. Underscoring his acknowledgment that only the Navy could make the determination of whether military secrets were safe, Hull emphasized the State Department's "desire to obviate any incident which might bring about unnecessary difficulties" with the Soviet government.[17] The Navy continued to object.[18] Only the State Department's warning that the ouster of the Soviet engineers might undermine Soviet–American relations persuaded the Navy to relent, albeit with "considerable irritation."[19] Ironically and tragically, this relatively lax American supervision of Soviet engineers in the United States ended up feeding Soviet fears of American espionage. In 1937, many of the people who had trained at RCA's plants in New Jersey were arrested at home as enemy agents.[20]

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[10] W. H. Standley to Secretary of State, 30 January 1934, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/7; Additional cases: 2 February 1934, 811.20161/9 to 18 December 1936, 811.20161/61.

[11] Secretary of War to Secretary of State, 15 August 1935, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/27; Department of State to the Ambassador Troyanovsky, 23 April 1937, United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Soviet Union, 1933–1939* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1933–1939) (hereafter FRUS), 470–71.

[12] J. T. Clement to Secretary of State, 10 July 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/48.

[13] W. H. Standley to Secretary of State, 18 July 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/49.

[14] J. G. Harbord, RCA to Secretary of State, 28 August 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/51.

[15] Frank W. Wozencraft to Joseph Coy Green, 29 August 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/52.

[16] J. G. Harbord, RCA to Secretary of State, 28 August 1936.

But in 1935, the year Ilf and Petrov arrived in the United States, Soviet officials were still looking for better ways to learn American tekhnika. P. A. Bogdanov, just returning from five years as a Soviet trade representative in New York City, advocated for more sustained contacts. In a series of articles on "How to Study American Technique" that ran in *Pravda* and the English-language *Moscow Daily News* in the spring and summer of 1935, Bogdanov complained that junkets to the United States had not achieved their transformative goals: "A commission comes to America to familiarize itself with a branch of production; the men inspect plants, become enraptured, give thanks; return to the Soviet Union – and that is the last of them." Instead, Bogdanov argued, the Soviets needed to set up an "organizational nucleus in America" and "permanent relations" with American research institutes and professional societies.[21] The American ambassador in Moscow, William C. Bullitt, forwarded translations of the articles to the State Department, warning that, if implemented, Bogdanov's "nucleus" could facilitate Soviet industrial espionage. The Soviets were already routinely forcing American citizens doing business in the Soviet Union "to hand over their documents, including blue prints, specifications and formulae."[22] But Bogdanov was interested in something more basic than industrial secrets. Reminding his readers that "Comrade Stalin teaches us to combine the wide Russian revolutionary élan with American business efficiency," he urged the acquisition of “the main elements of American business efficiency.” He defined these as “the ability to solve problems in the simplest and most efficient manner, with the minimum expenditure of funds and labor and attended with the maximum effort.”[23]

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[17] Cordell Hull to Claude A. Swanson, 31 August 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/51.

[18] Joseph C. Green to Secretary of State, 31 August 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/54; Joseph C. Green to Secretary of State, 1 September 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/55. Memorandum, Office of Arms and Munitions Control, 17 April 1937, FRUS, 470.

[19] Joseph C. Green, Memorandum, 5 September 1936, NACP, RG 59, 811.20161/58.

[20] Loren F. Jones to E. W. Engstrom, 13 July 1937, David Sarnoff Library, www.davidsarnoff.org/jones-letter01.html; Loren F. Jones to Dr. Irving Wolff, 11 March 1938, Sarnoff Library, www.davidsarnoff.org/jones-letter04.html (accessed 9 July 2021).

[21] P. A. Bogdanov, "How to Study American Technique," *Pravda*, 20 June 1935 as translated in Bullitt to Secretary of State, 22 June 1935, NACP, RG 59, 711.61/527.

[22] Bullitt to Secretary of State, 22 June 1935.

Bogdanov’s recognition that the American “efficiency” he hoped to introduce into the Soviet Union operated by squeezing “maximum effort” out of workers highlights the central conundrum of Soviet Amerikanizm. Optimistic that American methods could be adapted to socialist conditions, Soviet observers denied any necessary connection between the capitalist system and the capitalists’ tekhnika.[24] The Depression scarcely clouded Bogdanov’s sunny view of the potential of American techniques and habits. He argued that even efficiencies designed to intensify the exploitation of workers “must and can be used by us … in the interests of the toilers.”[25] Once in Soviet hands, American tools would, somehow, naturally serve the workers.

Ilf and Petrov, too, operated on the assumption that American techniques could be cleanly and fully detached from American misery. Their descriptions of the Ford plant juxtaposed glowing assessments of American mechanical genius and grim reminders of the mind-numbing tedium of the assembly line. Contrasting the “excellent cheap cars” rolling off the line and driving “into freedom” with the workers “imprisoned” in the factory, they reflected that, in this case, “the triumph of tekhnika” brought only the “misfortune of man.”[26] However, the obvious alienation and mistreatment of labor did not appreciably dampen their wide-eyed admiration of the colossal and efficient plant and its grandfatherly proprietor. They distinguished “our” Henry Ford, an industrial innovator and master mechanic, from the Henry Ford idolized in the United States, a merchant and millionaire. If they knew of Ford’s promotion of antisemitism, they did not mention it.[27] The Soviet authors were far kinder to Ford than the American novelist John Dos Passos. His nearly contemporary thumbnail biography, “Tin Lizzie,” published in the final volume of his *U.S.A.* trilogy, blamed Ford for the 1932 murder of four hunger marchers as they approached the River Rouge plant seeking work.[28]

On the American side, officials and corporations welcomed Soviet visitors, anticipating that Americans stood to profit from economic and cultural exchanges. Their calculations rested on the assumption that openness, friendly relations, and material benefits would soften the Soviet commitment to international revolution – would, in short, make the Soviet Union more like "us." Signing off on a 1937 agreement to allow the Soviet purchase of battleships and submarines, Robert F. Kelley, chief of the Division of Eastern European Affairs, explained that he expected "the evolution of the Soviet Government eventually into a purely national Government."[29] Here Americans fundamentally misunderstood Soviet enthusiasm for the "American way." The Soviet state sent engineers, and engineers of human souls, to the United States to learn how to apply American tools to the project of building a socialist state antithetical to and in competition with capitalist America.[30]

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[23] P. A. Bogdanov, “Notes on American Business Efficiency,” *Pravda*, 19 May 1935 as translated in Bullitt to Secretary of State, 22 June 1935.

[24] Stefan J. Link, *Forging Global Fordism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Contest over the Industrial Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 82–85.

[25] Bogdanov, “How to Study.”

[26] OA, 122.

[27] OA, 252; Fedorova, *Yankees*, 139.

[28] John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 813.

In 1933, the Soviet and American governments undertook the project of establishing friendlier relations with the goal of leveraging open exchanges to strengthen "our" side. As Ilf and Petrov's road trip illustrates, on the micro level, Soviet–American interactions relied on people able to operate across linguistic, cultural, and political borders. Officials on both sides needed, but also distrusted, even feared such people, whose loyalties might lie with the "promised land" on the other side. In the Soviet Union, these fears resulted in the devastation of people with connections abroad during the Great Purges.[31] In the United States, the government treated immigrants as potentially nefarious agents of a ruthless adversary. Ilf and Petrov seem to have had a clear sense of the fraught status of immigrants and border crossers on both sides of the ideological divide. They often identified their Russian Jewish American guides as simply "Americans." But they also recognized that "real America" and "real Americans" were deeply politicized concepts.

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[29] Memorandum, 24 March 1937, FRUS, 466.

[30] Link, *Forging Global*, 11–13.

[31] Michael Gleb, "'Karelian Fever': The Finnish Immigrant Community during Stalin's Purges," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45 (1993): 1096–104; Sergei Zhuravlev, "American Victims of the Stalin Purges, 1930s," in Brigitte Studer and Heiko Haumann, eds., *Stalinistische Subjeckte: Individuum und System in der Sowjetunion und der Komintern, 1929–1953* (Zurich: Chronos, 2006), 397–414; Andrea Graziosi, "Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920–40: Their Experience and Their Legacy," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 33 (Spring 1988): 48–49; Markku Kangaspuro, "American Finnish Emigration to Soviet Karelia: Bread, Work and Broken Dreams," *Twentieth Century Communism* 7 (November 2014): 89, 94–97; Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken: An American Tragedy in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 5; Alexey Golubev and Irina Takala, *The Search for a Socialist El Dorado: Finnish Immigration to Soviet Karelia from the United States and Canada in the 1930s* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 121–55.