

Knowledge and Steel: American Involvement in Soviet Industrialization between 1927-1937

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Abstract

My project, Knowledge and Steel: American Involvement in Soviet Industrialization between 1927-1937, is an original research paper that explores the role America played during the first two Five-Year plans in the USSR. I argue that the Bolsheviks looked to emulate the change that took place in the American Midwest during the late 19th century, turning a largely agrarian society into a modern industrial nation. This quest to create an "Americanized bolshevism" drove Soviet planners to adopt the best industrial practices and models of production from the United States. My research advances our understanding of this still very incomplete tale. It explores the Bolsheviks' fierce resolve to adopt US industrial culture and the mechanisms of collaboration, especially before the establishment of formal diplomatic relationships between the two countries in 1933.

For the first time in historiography, the corporate archives of the Ford Motor Company are used to answer these questions (as a recipient of the LASURI research fellowship, I was able to work in Ford Archive). I use this complex series of documents to show the Ford corporation acting "as a state," and Soviet agents in the US making strategic choices between "technology" and "culture". The second set of sources that I use are memoirs produced by two American engineers, Zara Witkin, and John D. Littlepage, who went to work in the USSR in the late through the mid 1930's. In addition to confirming that American corporate and individual involvement allowed the Five-Year plans to succeed, my research explains how Americans understood their role in this partnership and what their Soviet partners understood by "Fordism" and American industrialization.

Research Questions

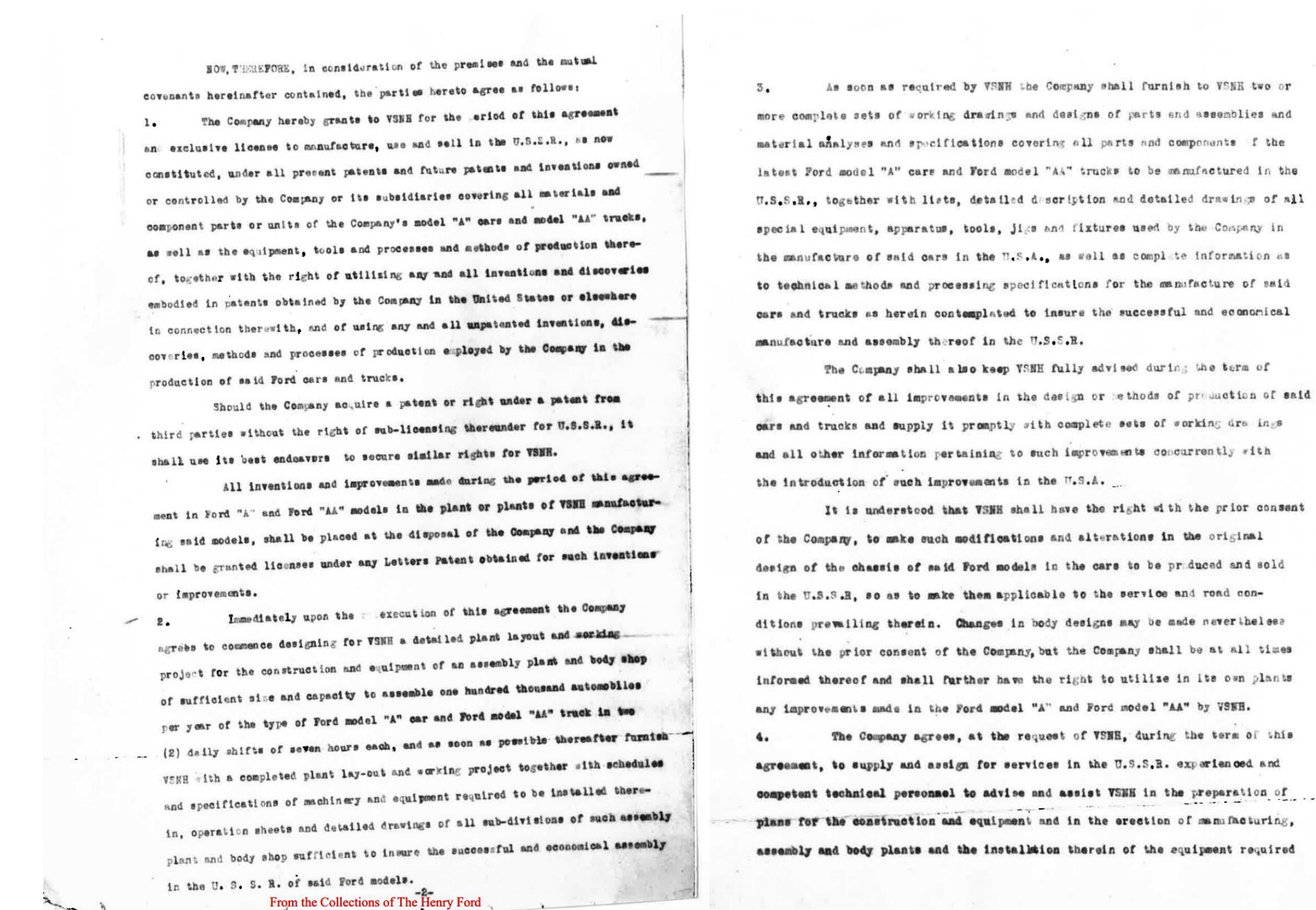
- Was Soviet industrialization successful?
- Would Soviet industrialization have been successful without American assistance?
- What was borrowed from American industrial culture?
- How was this possible without formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union pre-1933?
- Was the Ford Motor Company acting as a state?

My Sources

- The Ford Motor Company corporate archives: The FMC archives contained a total of 622 pages of documents. These documents included Agreements/contracts, Correspondences between officials and departments, sales agreements, and summary data of transactions with AMTORG and Avtostroy. Along with these documents there is also the memoirs of Charles Sorenson, one of the heads of the FMC which helped to provide further insight into how Ford officials dealt with their Soviet counterparts.
- In Search of Soviet Gold, by John D. Littlepage, published 1938 upon his returning from the USSR. This memoir tells in detail Littlepage's experience in the USSR, from being recruited by a Soviet official until his departure 10 years later. His accounts of daily life, and the changes he witnessed in Soviet society throughout the 1930's is remarkable, and offers a unique perspective of this revolutionary time.
- An American Engineer in Stalin's Russia, The Memoirs of Zara Witkin, 1932-1934. Written upon his return to the United States in 1934. The original manuscript was destroyed, but a second copy was kept by his friend and was eventually found by Historian Michael Gelb who then published it in 1991.

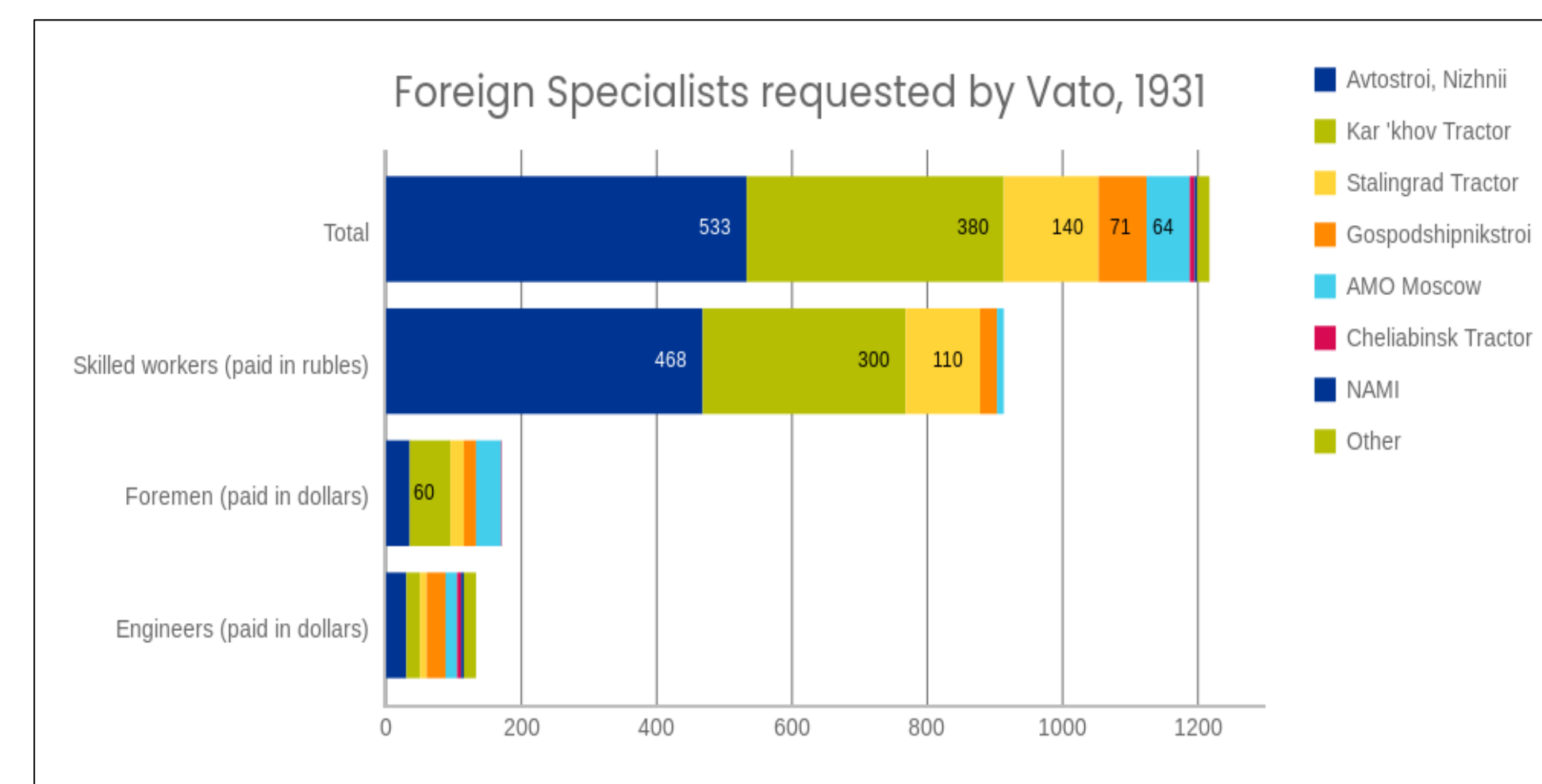
The Ford Motor Company

In 1929, the Dearborn Agreement was signed between the Ford Motor Company, AMTORG (the Soviet-American Trading Corporation), and Avtostroy (the Soviet automobile manufacturer).

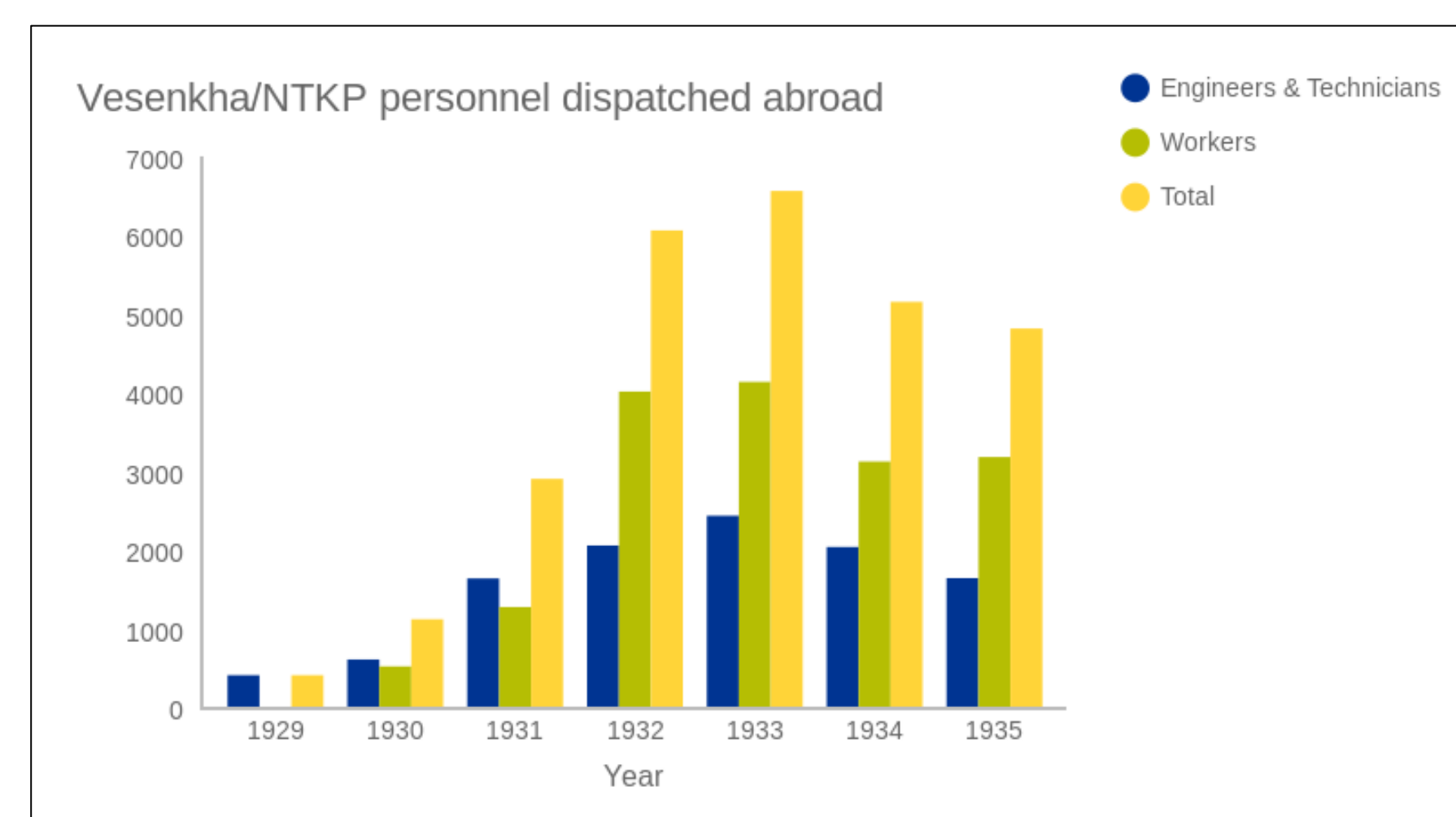


Pages one and two of the Dearborn Agreement, 1929.

The Ford Motor Company had an open door when it came to sharing information with its Soviet counterparts. Soviet workers who spent time working at the River Rouge plant noted that the FMC provided the "highest form of collaboration" and "gave all of their experience". Hundreds of Soviet workers and engineers between 1930 and 1936 would call River Rouge home to learn hands on skills and the necessary experience to bring back to the USSR.



A number of Ford workers would go to help jump-start the Gorky and Moscow factories. These workers would be paid a handsome salary for their assistance, far more than their Soviet counterparts. The Bolsheviks would also look to recruit former Ford workers to become full time contractors on 1-2 year contracts.



Notable Figures

Zara Witkin

A semi-prominent American engineer from California, he worked on the Wilshire Temple and the Hollywood Bowl. After being recruited by AMTORG, he worked in the USSR for 2 years within the heavy industry trust. Upon his return to the US he wrote a memoir entitled An American Engineer in Stalin's Russia but was only edited and published in 1991 by Historian Michael Gelb.



Zara Witkin, 1932

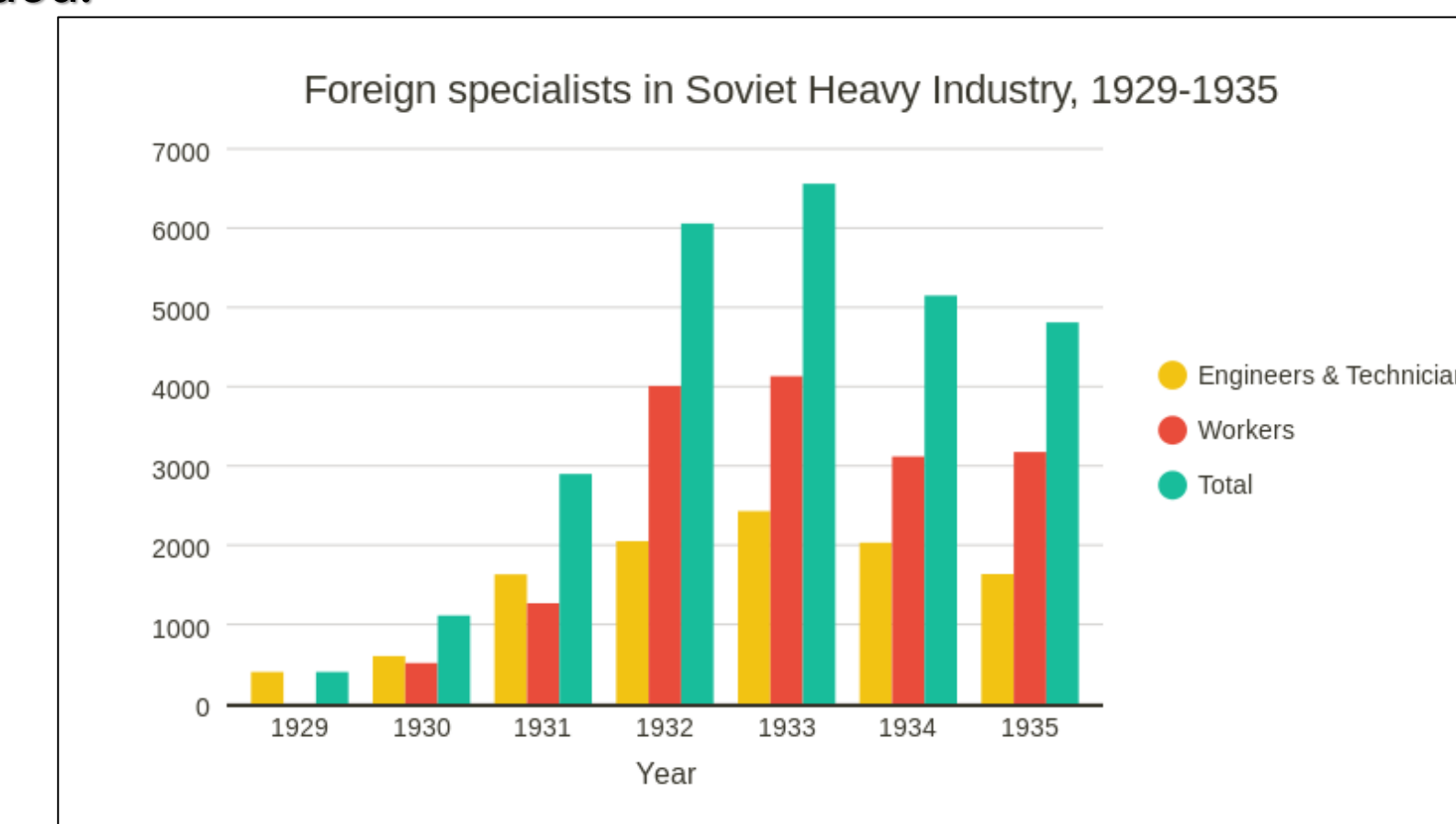
John D. Littlepage

A prominent American gold miner who spent most of his career in the Alaskan gold mines. He was recruited by Serebrovsky, head of the Soviet Gold Trust to work in the USSR in 1927. He spent a total of 10 years in the USSR, and upon his return in 1938, wrote and published his memoir entitled, The Search for Soviet Gold.

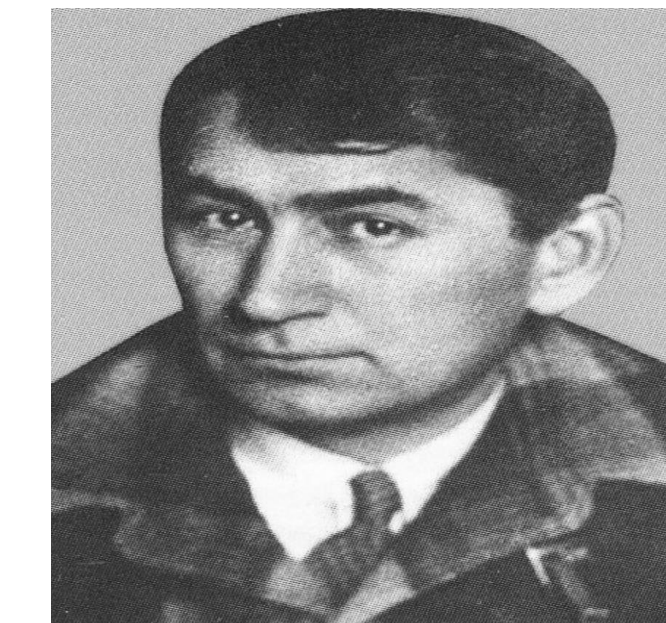


John D. Littlepage

Zara Witkin and John D. Littlepage represent the two types of Americans who came to the USSR for work. Witkin was a "revolutionary dreamer" who was motivated by socialist ideology. Littlepage was a technocrat, devoid of political motivation who went for the adventure, and the high salary he was to be paid for his expertise and experience. The start of the Great Depression in 1929 helped AMTORG recruit thousands of skilled Americans to join Soviet industrial projects with the attractive salaries they were provided.



Stepan Semynovich Dybets is the most important man in the exchange between Ford and the USSR. He was the head of the Avtostroy agency and was the first director of the Gorky automobile plant. Dybets lived in the United States after fleeing the Russian Empire in 1903 for revolutionary activities, and found himself in the United States in 1907. He worked in the US until his deportation to Ukraine in 1917 due to union activities. His experience working in American factories influenced his career, leading him to head the exchange with Ford and campaigned for the adoption of Fordism. In 1937 he was executed as a spy during the Stalinist purges.



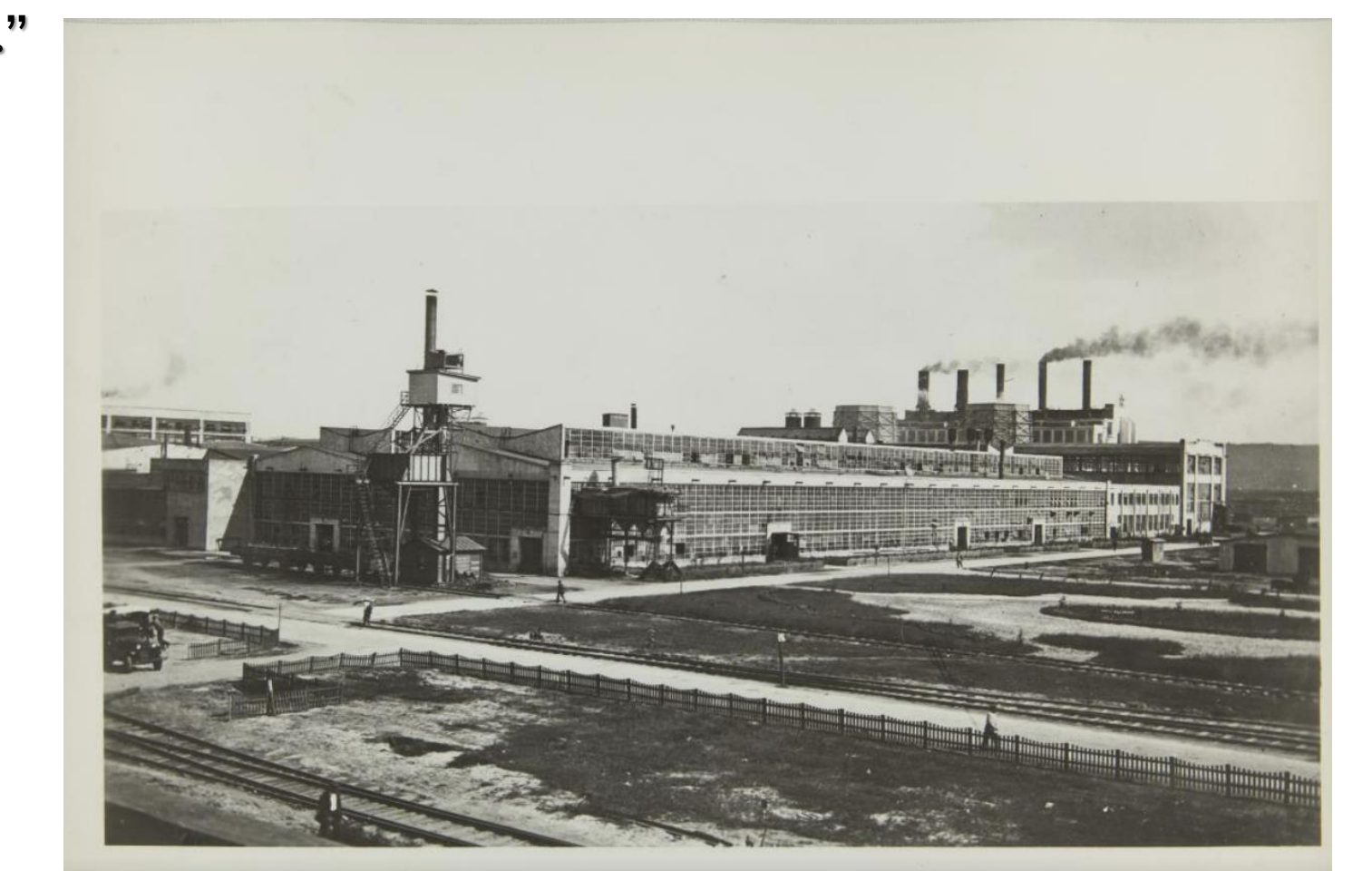
Conclusion

The unique relationship between Ford Motor Company and the USSR proved to be more than the selling of just automobiles, and as my research has shown it was one of the largest and most effective transfers of technology in history. Soviet authorities sought to adopt Fordism to create an "Americanized-Bolshevism" that would adopt the best industrial practices of the United States and employ them in the factories of the USSR. However, the Bolsheviks did not adopt the cultural aspects of Fordism which resulted in a failure to fully emulate the American model of Fordism. The experience, knowledge and equipment sold by American corporations to the Soviet Union however still proved decisive in Soviet industrialization efforts. Without this assistance, the first two Five-Year plans would have suffered heavily.



Ford Motor Company Factory, Molotov Avtozavod, Gorky, USSR, 1935.

Individuals also played an important role in Soviet industrialization efforts. Thousands of foreign specialists like Witkin and Littlepage would venture to the USSR. With the Great Depression in full swing, the many skilled Americans who were out of work took AMTORG's offer to aid Soviet industries. Most Americans would not renew their contracts for work, and returned to the United States as soon as possible. By 1938, nearly all foreign specialists had left the USSR due to the increasing hostility of the Soviet government towards foreign workers. The many leftists who went to the USSR, like Witkin, would leave disappointed and disillusioned with the realities of Soviet life and Socialism. Most would fail to grasp how Soviet industries operated, which led to many growing frustrated and feeling as if they were doing nothing. In 1933, Witkin wrote home and complained, "the chauvinistic poppycock which destroys the possibilities of the best foreign engineers, and bureaucracy which devours patients and corrodes nerves."



Ford Motor Company's Foundry at Molotov Avtozavod, Gorky, USSR, 1935.

Acknowledgements

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