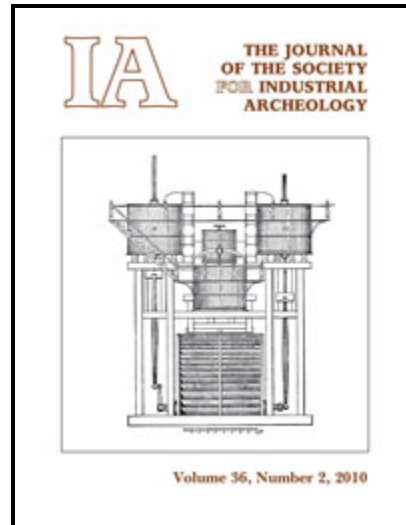


The Soviet Problem with Two “Unknowns”: How an American Architect and a Soviet Negotiator Jump-Started the Industrialization of Russia

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Abstract

Soviet industrialization was a complex economic and political undertaking about which much remains unclear. Rather than examine the process as a whole, this essay focuses on two fairly unknown players in the history of Soviet-American relations— one American firm and one Soviet negotiator—and their contribution to the amazingly rapid Soviet industrialization of the early 1930s, emphasizing some human and business factors behind Stalin’s Five-Year Plan. Saul G. Bron, during his tenure as chairman of Amtorg Trading Corporation in 1927–1930, contracted with leading American companies to help build Soviet industrial infrastructure and commissioned the firm of the foremost American industrial architect from Detroit, Albert Kahn, as consulting architects to the Soviet Government. The work of both played a major role in laying the foundation of the Soviet automotive, tractor, and tank industry and led to the development of Soviet defense capabilities, which in turn played an important role in the Allies’ defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Drawing on Russian and English-language sources, this essay is based on comprehensive research including previously-unknown archival documents, contemporaneous and current materials, and private archives.

Part I: Albert Kahn

“I listened to what people said they wanted and gave it to them.”

— Albert Kahn

Introduction

Soviet industrialization was a complex economic and political undertaking about which much remains unclear. Few issues are more controversial and ideologically-laden than the intertwined questions about the origin of Soviet “superindustrialization” of the early 1930s, the dual use of imported technology for civilian and military purposes, and Stalin’s policies toward Nazi Germany prior to its invasion of the Soviet Union. Even though Stalin’s crimes against his people were exposed in the 1950s by Khrushchev, it was—and for many in Russia still is—sacriligious to question his role in industrialization and the Second World War, the Great Patriotic War for people of the former U.S.S.R. who perceived Stalin as their savior.

But regardless of whether, in the 1930s, Stalin’s Russia had been preparing for aggression, preventive war, or defense, by the time of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 Russia was not the weak, poorly-armed ally described in 1924 by Hitler contemplating a German-Russian war against Europe:

Russia would completely drop out of this war as a technical factor. . . . The universal motorization of the world, which will be overwhelmingly decisive in the next war, could hardly be met by us. For not only has Germany itself remained shamefully far behind in this most important field, but with the little it has, it would have to support Russia, which even today cannot call its own a single factory in which can be manufactured a motor vehicle that really runs.

However, by the time of the Nazi invasion in 1941, the U.S.S.R. had turned itself from a weak country without a single homemade truck into a powerful military force. After the initial blitzkrieg advance, Hitler was stunned to discover that the Red Army was much better armed than he expected. In his broadcast to the German people on October 3, 1941, he declared that the occupied Soviet territories appeared to be “a single armaments factory,” and that before the occupation he could not have imagined how far the U.S.S.R. had progressed in its preparation for war. The Soviet arsenal became a major factor in the outcome of the War; but, one may ask, from where had it all come?

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[Full text of Part I: Albert Kahn is available on jstor.org](#)

Part II: Saul G. Bron

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Volume 37, No. 1-2, pp. 5–28.*

*“We have before us in the Soviet Union an
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— Saul G. Bron*

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[Full text of Part II: Saul G. Bron is available on jstor.org](#)

KEY WORDS: Albert Kahn, Saul G. Bron, Amtorg, Ford, Soviet-American trade, industrialization, Five-Year Plan, Stalingrad Tractor Plant, Chelyabinsk Tractor Plant, Gorky Automobile Plant, Nizhny Novgorod, technical aid, Альберт Кан, С.Г. Брон, Амторг, Форд, Советско-Американские торговые отношения, индустриализация, пятилетний план, пятилетка, Сталинградский тракторный завод, Челябинский тракторный завод, Горьковский автомобильный завод, Нижний Новгород, техническая помощь