

Title: Russian Henry Ford

Author: Milla Fedorova, Georgetown University

The itinerary of Russian writers travelling to America in the 1920s -1930s (Maiakovskii, Pilniak, Ilf and Petrov) usually included a visit to Henry Ford's factory. The image of Ford created in their travelogues was a part of "the legend of Henry Ford" – a significant phenomenon of Russian popular culture at that time. Ford's books were translated into Russian, Soviet workers and engineers who have been studying at Ford's factories published their memoirs (Vasil'ev, Sheinman). In the popular Russian reception, Ford's figure was a symbol of Americanism, and reflected fears and hopes connected with America in Russian mind. My task is to study Ford's image in the fiction writers' travelogues against the background of Ford's cult in Russia. The writers were trying to deconstruct "the Ford's legend", but in fact, contributed to it: in their writings the image of Ford was finally casted.

As Ilf and Petrov mention in "Little Golden America," the Ford admired in Russia (the inventor of effective production organization) and "the American Henry Ford" (a prosperous capitalist, self-made man) were two different figures. All Russian authors of Ford's fictional and documentary portraits were dealing with this gap between "our Ford" and "the American Ford." In accordance with this task, they were trying to familiarize and defamiliarize Ford simultaneously. On the one hand, they showed him as "svoi": Ilf and Petrov compared him with a Russian peasant-inventor; Pilniak recognized in Ford a factory owner from his childhood. On the other hand, all these Russian models they found for Ford were provincial and outdated.

The young Soviet society put forward the task to catch up with America and pass it, borrowing some technologies and methods and implementing them in Russia: what was considered dangerous and merciless exploitation in America was expected to be really beneficial and glorious in Russia with its progressive socio-economic system. Thus, the ambiguous features of Ford's image reflect the paradoxical nature of this task.