

# Book Review

- Stefan J. Link. *Forging Global Fordism: Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and the Contest over the Industrial Order*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 328. \$39.95 (Cloth).

This book offers an engaging and provocative global history of Fordism, focusing in particular on the Nazi and Soviet auto industries. Stefan J. Link opens the book in Detroit, which his introduction labels the “capital of the twentieth century.” “When it came to developing fresh principles after the bankruptcy of the older economic order in the global crisis of the 1930s,” he writes, “it was Detroit that drew all modernizers of postliberal persuasion, left and right, Soviets and Nazis, fascists and socialists” (2). Although we tend to associate the thirties with the Depression and de-globalization, it was a time of critical transfers of mass production technologies between the American Midwest—with Ford at its center—and the radically different regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Their common experience of engagement with American industry, Link emphasizes, was part of a larger story of industrial development in which competitors sought to catch up to the United States. Far from a retreat from globalization, then, the interwar period was rather “an era of furious and consequential attempts to transform its very structure” (3).

Although the book’s subtitle focuses on Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Link’s treatment of the United States and Ford’s place within the American economy is equally worth attention. This is particularly evident in the book’s first chapter, “The Populist Roots of Mass Production.” Link takes the reader on an evocative tour of Detroit in 1937, spotlighting the sights that the many high-profile visitors from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union encountered as they worked to draw on Ford’s model in building their own automobile factories. The Midwest had by this time pulled ahead of the older industrial centers in the east in industrial production, employing one of every seven Americans, whether directly on the factory floor or in its supply chains. Detroit was the center of this shift of the country’s economic gravity—the “center of a new American growth regime, one that departed from nineteenth-century patterns” and whose workers enjoyed a level of disposable income that would have been “quite unimaginable” to their nineteenth-century counterparts (24). Link underscores not only the significance of this transformation, but also its political nature. “Neither modernization nor capital accumulation,” he writes,

“compelled the rise of automotive mass production; it took deep-rooted producerist commitments and the sting of mutual class resentments to launch the mass production era” (30). Ford’s production orientation and populism stood in sharp contrast to the investor capitalism associated with the east coast. While General Motors harnessed the latter, Ford built on a tradition of producer populism and kept his company in private hands. At stake was a larger vision of the future of society: the meaning of mass production for the American economy and society, Link writes, remained “a sharply contested question” and Ford “remained a visible reminder that mass production initially arose by challenging liberal conceits about economic development” (48).

Fordism, then, was alluring to Nazis and Soviets alike, offering in the tumultuous interwar years an attractive development model that spoke “not to the forces of liberal restoration but to the voices of postliberal reversal” (54). Link elaborates on this appeal in the book’s fascinating second chapter, “Ford’s Bible of the Modern Age.” In it, he analyzes the remarkable international reception of Ford’s 1922 autobiography *My Life and Work*, which was ghostwritten by Samuel Crowther. The book attacks the role of finance capital in business, emphasizing instead the collective nature of production. Ford’s vision was one in which factories exist to produce goods, not money; in which the purpose of business itself is service, not profits. The book also looked ahead to a better future, a world in which financiers were sidelined and “money reduced to the proper task of intermediation,” enabling a “technology-fueled spiral of high wages and low prices” to “unleash a civilization of material comfort, ‘widely and fairly distributed’” (58–59). This Fordist vision was compelling not least, then, because it addressed “the dual challenges of industrial reconstruction and political resurgence” in ways that spoke to both right and left, to Nazis and to Soviets (86).

Link’s next two chapters examine the development of the Soviet and German auto industries in the 1930s. Soviet and Nazi leaders alike benefitted from the remarkably open-source stance of the Ford Motor Company, sending numerous experts to observe Ford’s operations and signing technical assistance agreements with the company that would prove vital in developing the expertise, technology, and personnel necessary to build factories on the Ford model. The major product of the Soviet-Ford exchanges was GAZ (*Gor’kovskii Avtomobil’nyi Zavod*), the automobile factory built at Nizhnii Novgorod (Gorky) and referred to as “Auto Giant” in the Soviet press. As Link emphasizes, importing foreign technology was particularly vital to the industrialization drive at the center of Stalin’s five-year plans. Link uses the relationship between the Ford Motor Company and the Soviet Union to spotlight the key role of foreign firms in the Stalinist industrialization drive, charting the uneven development of GAZ—in particular the ways in which Fordist flow production and the Stakhanovism used to motivate Soviet workers in the 1930s often clashed. He also shows how, importantly, flow production returned to prominence at GAZ before

and throughout World War II. Whereas Soviet leaders were most drawn to Fordism for its potential in realizing the five-year-plan vision of transforming an impoverished, largely agrarian economy, Nazi leaders oversaw an already highly developed industrial economy, albeit one that lagged far behind the United States in automobile production. Rather than purchasing machinery and technological systems, German leaders adopted a less cash-intensive approach, utilizing “targeted industrial reconnaissance,” the recruitment of American experts, and capital controls—both Ford and GM had sizeable investments in Germany, which they did not have in the USSR—to build a mass production auto industry. Whereas Soviet leadership banished foreign firms from its soil and purchased, at great cost, their technology and expertise, Nazi leaders encouraged the operation of foreign automakers, provided they support the military-industrial development goals that the state pursued. Led by Opel, the German auto industry became key to Nazi rearmament. In its use of capital controls as a policy tool, Link emphasizes, Nazi Germany’s approach to the auto industry had much in common with “many other authoritarian, activist, and development-oriented states of the twentieth century,” such as South Korea, postwar Brazil, and late-twentieth-century China (170–71).

Having analyzed the development of Nazi and Soviet auto production in the thirties, Link uses his fifth chapter, “War of the Factories,” to compare their wartime performance. Both regimes used Fordist flow production to mobilize unskilled workforces. Link gives special attention to the role of American-born German engineer William Werner, the leading figure on Nazi Germany’s wartime Industrial Council, in pressuring firms to adopt flow production. Though in many ways successful, the cajoling of industry exemplified by Werner was insufficient for the task at hand, as the Soviet Union “decisively outmatched Germany in the war of the factories in every weapons category except ships and submarines” (196). The key, Link argues, was the political economy within which war production took place. Whereas German leaders, like Werner, had to bully industry toward flow production and rationalization, the coercive Soviet industrialization drive in the prewar years had already focused on quantity over quality and on squeezing industry in the service of the state. “The Soviet advantage,” Link explains, “lay not so much in the ‘planned’ character of its economy than in its ‘command’ character: not in the regime’s capacity to efficiently allocate resources but rather in its capacity to ruthlessly mobilize them” (205).

This is a rich book on an important topic. It is both deeply researched, drawing extensively on Russian, German, and American archives (as well as British and Italian ones) and engagingly written, giving due attention to particulars while consistently keeping an eye on the larger picture. It will be of interest to scholars, teachers, and students at the graduate and advanced undergraduate levels. Teachers of world history will particularly benefit from the provocative ways in which Link’s narrative can help to frame the history of the twentieth century. He suggests that we see the interwar years “not as an aberration, but as the

century's very fulcrum," when "the vision of an integrated world based on liberal-imperial principles imploded and made way for an era of strategic, competitive industrial upgrading orchestrated by activist states" (18). "Like a palace built on the rocks and sediments of an earlier age," he continues, "the postwar order rose on the foundations of the antiliberal era that preceded it" (18). The argument is an especially striking one for those who, like me, teach at institutions in the Midwest, where students find themselves surrounded by the sediments of that earlier age in which Detroit could claim to be the capital of the future.

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