

A Visit to the Exhibition of All Nations: The Chicago World's Fair and the United States in Vasily Sidorov's Travel Writing

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Abstract

The Chicago World's Fair represented a continuity of the World's Fairs as key international events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which were widely covered, including in travelogues for home readership. The Russian Empire showed considerable interest in participating, especially after Americans organized a relief campaign during its famine a year ago. While the Russian government supervised the exhibits and sent specialists to study the American economy and society, many Russians visited the Fair individually, and some published travel accounts. This article explores the account titled *America. Travel Notes and Impressions* (1895) written by novelist and botanist Vasily Sidorov. Traveling with a group of European tourists, he admires American nature and praises American technological progress, mobility, and freedoms that could be potentially borrowed but shows uncertainty about major cities and excesses of industrialization and technological development, to a degree repeating what was pointed out by earlier Russian visitors. He evaluated the Fair and most of what he saw through the image of Europe which was also employed to emphasize his sense of cultural superiority.

Keywords: Chicago World's Fair, travel writing, Russian Empire, the United States, Vasily Sidorov

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Introduction: Russian Travelers in the U.S.

The decades following the Civil War saw an increasing number of Russians visiting America. The 1860s and the 1870s were particularly important since this period saw plenty of travel accounts on the U.S., thanks both to improvements in transportation and tourist infrastructure and a mounting interest in America among Russian intellectuals and readership alike, whether because of friendly relations and general notions of similarity between the two countries in terms of youth, resources, and potential, or due to America growing as a major alternative in development to Western Europe. Despite that major accounts of the time were written to a limited, albeit increasing, literate readership at home by primarily educated upper-class Russians or intellectuals who had money and the opportunity to cross the ocean, their travelogues covered major American cities and regions, described landscapes and gave a broad picture of social and cultural life in the U.S., evaluating the living conditions of diverse social groups including immigrants, women, Native, and African Americans, as well as urban and economic developments, education, and politics.¹ These early accounts provided what Greenblatt calls “mimetic capital,” the images which were continuously reproduced in late imperial Russia and, to a degree, even during the early Soviet period and laid the ground for the Russian vision of America, influencing preconceptions of future travelers.² The image of the U.S. was already complex by the 1890s, combining positive and negative notions of American life with a cumulative effect. Some Russians, whether travelers or specialists sent on the government's behalf, emphasized American practicality, efficiency, rapid technological development, industrial might, inventiveness, high standard of living, and social mobility. According to Rogger, these notions gradually developed in what he calls “Amerikanizm” as an alluring “industrial

¹ Norman Saul, *Concord and Conflict: The United States and Russia, 1867–1914* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 203–7.

² Margarita Marinova, *Transnational Russian-American Travel Writing*, Routledge Research in Travel Writing 5 (New York: Routledge, 2011), 16.

ideology” and an example for Russians in their development.³ However, visitors simultaneously underlined faults in the U.S., whether in terms of politics, culture, growing materialism and excesses of urbanization, the treatment of African or Native Americans, and other features of the American lifestyle.⁴

Aside from more general travels to the U.S. in the decades from the 1860s until the First World War, Russians interacted with America on the grounds of World’s Fairs held there. While there were only a couple of visitors who published travelogues about the Centennial Exhibition and while Russian presence at the 1904 Fair in St. Louis was meager due to the Russo-Japanese War, Chicago World’s Fair served as a major occasion for a considerable number of Russians to visit the U.S. and to participate in the discourse about America.

The Russian Empire and the World’s Columbian Exposition

The Chicago World’s Fair, officially called the World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Jackson Park and adjacent areas from 1 May to 30 October 1893, offered items presented by over 65,000 exhibitors from more than fifty countries and colonies as well as the majority of the U.S. states and territories. A key part of the fairgrounds was the White City, which included fourteen major Exhibit Halls, built mostly in a neoclassical and Renaissance style from temporary materials, incorporating Venice-like streams, rich greenery, and showcasing all kinds of articles from machinery and the latest advances in electricity to arts and anthropological exhibits. In contrast, the mile-long Midway Plaisance offered diverse entertainment, exotic pleasures, and ethnic performances, the most notorious being the Ferris Wheel and Cairo Street. Apart from exhibits and popular amusements of the Midway, foreign, and U.S. state buildings, the Fair included over 1200 sessions of the World Congresses, with the most prominent being the World’s Congress of Representative Women and the World’s Parliament of Religions. Around 27.5 million visitors (around 21.5 of them paid) visited the fairgrounds, a colossal number compared to the Centennial Exhibition, but still less than the previous World’s Fair in Paris in 1889.⁵ On the positive side, the revenues managed to cover immense expenditures of around twenty-eight million dollars and leave a small profit.⁶

The Fairs held before the First World War represented a complex and diverse combination of exhibits, participants, interactions, and conflicting messages, adjusting themselves to the latest technological developments and putting emphasis on different social, economic, and cultural questions throughout the decades. The visitors’ age, social status, available free time, and goals of the visit significantly complicate the image that one might have gotten from the Fair. Many

³ Hans Rogger, “Amerikanizm and the Economic Development of Russia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 no. 3 (1981): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500013426>.

⁴ Marinova, *Transnational Russian-American Travel Writing*, 111–12.

⁵ Harlow Higinbotham, *Report of the President to the Board of Directors of the World’s Columbian Exposition. Chicago, 1892–1893* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1898), 409.

⁶ Higinbotham, 349.

of the studies emphasize the impact of Fairs on introducing new ideas and values to the public that suggested a constructed and ordered vision of the present as well as an idealized future based on primarily Western values.⁷ Others point out the influence of Fairs on the rise of modern tourism, consumerism, nation-states, and the public acceptance of urban planning.⁸ While some underline the positive economic and cultural impact of international exhibitions, there also exists a substantial criticism of the Fairs of that period based on the promotion of Western and elite vision of the past, present, and future as a response to rapid changes caused by industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of popular culture.⁹ Others underline the connection between displays and racial hierarchies, justification of imperialism, and misrepresentation or exclusion of certain ethnicities, cultures, or challenges of the industrial age.¹⁰

The arguments for organizing a third major Fair in the United States were also diverse: the desire to show America's coming of age and its equality with Western Europe, to boost national unity, to address different domestic problems and rapid changes in the age of urbanization, industrialization, and massive immigration, to increase its prestige worldwide, and to promote diplomatic, scientific, and economic cooperation.¹¹ While there are debates similar to those presented above, scholars also explore the resistance of African and Native Americans to their misrepresentation as well as the new level of influence that women have acquired

⁷ Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915* (Berkeley, CA: Lowie Museum of Anthropology, 1983), 2–5; Maurice Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 45–46; Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*, *Studies in Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 27.

⁸ Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity*, 70–71; Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World's Columbian Expedition & American Culture* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1979), 10–11; Rebecca Graff, "Being Toured While Digging Tourism: Excavating the Familiar at Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15, no. 2 (2011): 224, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-011-0138-x>; Joep Leerssen, "Trademarking the Nation: World Fairs, Spectacles, and the Banalization of Nationalism," in *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities: International Exhibitions as Cultural Platforms, 1851–1958*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm, *National Cultivation of Culture* 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 49.

⁹ Roche, *Mega-Events and Modernity*, 59; David Fisher, "Exhibiting Russia at the World's Fairs, 1851–1900" (PhD Dissertation, Indiana University, 2003), 5.

¹⁰ Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870–1930," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (1993): 359–60, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1993.8.3.02a00040>; Jayne Luscombe, "World Expos and Global Power Relations," in *Power, Politics and International Events: Socio-Cultural Analyses of Festivals and Spectacles*, ed. Udo Merkel, *Routledge Advances in Event Research Series* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 69–72.

¹¹ Badger, *The Great American Fair*, 21; Chaim Rosenberg, *America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), ix.

during the Fair.¹² There are also studies establishing the connection between the Fair and the idea of empire in the U.S.¹³ Others explore the significance of the Fair for American architecture, urban development, and specifically Chicago. Finally, some scholars link the Fair with the contrasts of American culture (for example, comparing the cultural message of the White City and the popular culture of the Midway Plaisance and more broadly Chicago) and try to evaluate the response of Americans to the Fair as a nation, contrasting its optimism and belief in progress with insecurities.¹⁴

Equally important was the self-representation of foreign nations on the fairgrounds and their competition in terms of presenting accomplishments in economic, social, military, and cultural development. The Fairs contributed substantially to the formation of national identity, stimulating national or imperial pride and simultaneously movements for cultural or national autonomy within empires.¹⁵ This was also the case for the Russian Empire which participated in most of the Fairs until the First World War on an official, government-sponsored level. Russia sought to present itself as a modern and great European power while also aiming to establish its distinct cultural identity through arts and architecture (for instance, Russia constantly constructed nationally distinguishing *style russe* pavilions based on medieval Russian architecture).¹⁶ There are varying opinions

¹² Dennis Downey, "Rite of Passage: The World's Columbian Exposition and American Life" (PhD Dissertation, Marquette University, 1981), 271–72, Rite of Passage; Anna Paddon and Sally Turner, "African Americans and the World's Columbian Exposition," *Illinois Historical Journal* 88, no. 1 (1995): 34; Melissa Rinehart, "To Hell with the Wigs! Native American Representation and Resistance at the World's Columbian Exposition," *American Indian Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2012): 404, <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.36.4.0403>.

¹³ Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 4; Mona Domosh, "A 'Civilized' Commerce: Gender, 'Race', and Empire at the 1893 Chicago Exposition," *Cultural Geographies* 9, no. 2 (2002): 181–83, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474002eu242oa>.

¹⁴ David McDaniel, "A Century of Progress? Cultural Change and the Rise of Modern Chicago, 1893–1933" (PhD Dissertation, The University of Wisconsin, 1999), 376; James Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 125; Daniel Miller, "The Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the American National Character," *Journal of American Culture* 10, no. 2 (1987): 17, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1987.1002_17.x; Camilla Fojas, "American Cosmopolis: The World's Columbian Exposition and Chicago Across the Americas," *Comparative Literature Studies* 42, no. 2 (2005): 266, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40247477>.

¹⁵ Leerssen, "Trademarking the Nation," 48–49; Eric Storm, "The Transnational Construction of National Identities: A Classification of National Pavilions at World Fairs," in *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities: International Exhibitions as Cultural Platforms, 1851–1958*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm, National Cultivation of Culture 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 56; Bart Pushaw, "'Our Country Has Never Been as Popular as It Is Now!': Finland at the 1900 Exposition Universelle," in *Expanding Nationalisms at World's Fairs: Identity, Diversity, and Exchange, 1851–1915*, ed. David Raizman and Ethan Robey, Routledge Research in Art History (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁶ Yury Nikitin et al., "Russian Sections at World and International Fairs," *Advanced Materials Research* 1065–1069 (2014): 2680, <https://doi.org/10.4028/www.scientific.net/AMR.1065-1069.2674>.

on the achievement of these goals. Some argue that Russia showcased more raw resources and handicrafts, but fewer industrial products that emphasized successful modernization. Even though Russian arts and architecture highlighted unique national style and identity, they still did not suit the picture of the modern country, and instead, the Fairs in general contributed to the image of Russia as rather exotic or backward.¹⁷ Others object and argue that while at first major exhibitions Russia did not present much regarding industries, rapid industrialization in the 1890s allowed Russia to successfully showcase its industrial progress (including its exhibition of the development of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the construction of which began in 1891, in Chicago and later in Paris in 1900) and combine symbols of modernity with a memorable and unique national style.¹⁸

Russian participation in the World's Columbian Exposition was confirmed on 31 May 1891, and it was based on the government collecting and sponsoring the transportation of exhibits presented by government ministries, state institutions, and private exhibitors. While most of the work regarding organization was concentrated in the special committee led by Vladimir Kovalevsky, the director of the Department of Commerce and Industry of the Ministry of Finance, women's exhibits in the Women's Building of the Fair were under the authority of the Ladies Committee organized under the supervision of the Empress Maria Feodorovna. Artistic items were prepared by the Imperial Academy of Arts. Russia did not erect its separate building on the fairgrounds, instead constructing a series of pavilions in the White City's Exhibit Halls and auxiliary buildings. Russia was present in sixteen departments with articles by around 1000 exhibitors (1033 according to the index of the Russian pavilion; 1094 according to the General Commissioner of the Russian pavilion Pavel Glukhovskoy).¹⁹ The biggest number of Russian exhibits were presented in the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building and the Agricultural Building. However, the items in the latter did not become prominent, and it seems that the most attention by fairgoers was given to presented furs, furniture, leather, silk, cotton, pianos, educational materials, gold and silver embroidery, horses, a compilation of products from Central Asia,

¹⁷ Fisher, "Exhibiting Russia at the World's Fairs," 341; Alexandr Sokolov, "Rossiya na vseмирnoy vystavke v SShA v 1893 godu [Russia at the American World's Fair in 1893]," *Scientific Letters of Russian Customs Academy the St. Petersburg Branch Named After Vladimir Bobkov*, no. 2 (1997): 214.

¹⁸ Anthony Swift, "Russian National Identity at World Fairs, 1851–1900," in *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities: International Exhibitions as Cultural Platforms, 1851–1958*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm, National Cultivation of Culture 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 136–37.

¹⁹ Pavel Glukhovskoy, *Otchet general'nogo komissara Russkogo otdela Vseмирnoy Kolumbovoy vystavki v Chikago kamergera vys. dvora P.I. Glukhovskogo g. ministru finansov S.Yu. Vitte. [Report of the Commissar-General of the Russian pavilion of the World's Columbian Exposition P. Glukhovskoy to the Minister of Finance S. Witte]* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya V. Kirshbauma, 1895), 1; Imperial Russian Commission, Ministry of Finance, *World's Columbian Exposition 1893, Chicago. Catalogue of the Russian Section* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Russian Commission for the participation of Russia at the Worlds Columbian Exposition 1893, Chicago, 1893), 480.

and a sizable collection of oil paintings in the Palace of Fine Arts.²⁰ Russia also sent navy ships to take part in the festivities led by Admiral Nikolay Kaznakov, and three of them – the *Dmitry Donskoy*, the *Rynda*, and the *General-Admiral* – participated in the international naval review in New York several days before the opening of the Fair. On board was also Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich who made official visits to the President and major U.S. institutions and attended the Fair incognito.²¹

Russian participation in the Chicago World's Fair was aimed at sustaining diplomatic relations and its image as a great power as well as showcasing its economic development. To prove the latter, Russia presented a series of volumes edited and translated to English by American Consul-General to Russia John Crawford titled *The Industries of Russia*, covering light and heavy manufacturing, agriculture, trade, forestry, and mining with an extra book overviewing the early stage of the Trans-Siberian Railway (an additional volume was prepared in Russian regarding the general development of railroads and water communications, but it was not translated). The main idea behind this series was that Russia was about to make a breakthrough in industrial development, and the latter could ensure world peace, friendly relations between Russia and America, as well as “brotherly communion, the happiness of the masses, and a bloodless victory over nature” according to “the Christian order of things.”²²

However, apart from economic or diplomatic goals, Russia also wished to thank the U.S. for the relief campaign organized by individual Americans during the famine in Russia in 1891–1892, and this objective is stated in the official

²⁰ Moses Handy, ed., *The Official Directory of the World's Columbian Exposition, May 1st to October 30th, 1893. a Reference Book of Exhibitors and Exhibits; of the Officers and Members of the World's Columbian Commission, the World's Columbian Exposition and the Board of Lady Managers; a Complete History of the Exposition. Together with Accurate Descriptions of All State, Territorial, Foreign, Departmental and Other Buildings and Exhibits, and General Information Concerning the Fair* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey, 1893), 138–39.

²¹ Nadezhda Belinskaya, “Morskoye vedomstvo Rossiyskoy imperii na vseмирnoy Kolumbiyskoy vystavke v Chikago v 1893 godu: reprezentatsiya istoricheskoy druzhby [The Navy Ministry of the Russian Empire at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893: The representation of historical friendship],” in *Voyenno-istoricheskiye chteniya: Materialy X Vserossiyskoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii s mezhdunarodnym uchastiyem, Kerch', 01–04 marta 2022 goda* (Voyenno-istoricheskiye chteniya, Simferopol: Biznes-Inform, 2022), 154.

²² Department of Trade and Manufactures, Ministry of Finance, *The Industries of Russia*, ed. and trans. John Crawford, vol. 1, Manufactures and Trade, with a General Industrial Map (St. Petersburg: Trenke & Fusnot, 1893), liv.

report of the exposition prepared by Glukhovskoy.²³ Another important goal seemed to be to tackle negative images about Russia following George Kennan's publications on the Siberian exile system since Russian commissioners made a separate penitentiary pavilion displaying articles from Russian prisons. The concern over the impact of Kennan can be observed since Glukhovskoy states that this pavilion clearly debunks his claims.²⁴

Compared to the Centennial Exhibition and the 1904 World's Fair the World's Columbian Exposition received extensive coverage in Russia, especially after the famine relief campaign that gave extra momentum to the already existing interest in America. Along with exhibits came many Russian specialists whose task was to report on certain aspects of American industries or social development for the government or scientific institutions. At the same time, a record number of Russians (at least three hundred according to Saul) used this occasion to visit the United States, and some of them published travel accounts that combined impressions from the Fair and its host country and were intended, like photo albums, press articles, and other printed materials, for many of their compatriots who did not have a chance to visit the Fair but were curious about America.

The Biography of Vasily Sidorov and Initial Remarks

I will focus on the travel account titled *America. Travel Notes and Impressions* (1895) which was published by a botanist, novelist, and travel writer Vasily Sidorov (after 1858–1903). The author was born in the family of Mikhail Sidorov (1823–1887), a prospector and later a prominent explorer, philanthropist, and administrator who carried out expeditions and contributed to the development and scientific research of Siberia and the Russian North.²⁵ Mikhail Sidorov married the daughter of another prominent merchant of the Russian North Vasily Latkin and

²³ Glukhovskoy, *Otchet general'nogo komissara*, 148. For information about the famine and American relief to Russia see Saul, *Concord and Conflict*, 335–64; James Simms, "The Impact of the Russian Famine of 1891–92: A New Perspective" (PhD Dissertation, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1976); Richard Robbins, *Famine in Russia, 1891–1892: The Imperial Government Responds to a Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); Viktoriya Zhuravleva, *Ponimaniye Rossii v SShA: obrazy i mify, 1881–1914 [Understanding Russia in the United States: Images and myths, 1881–1914]* (Moscow: Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy gumanitarnyy universitet, 2012), chap. 3.

²⁴ Glukhovskoy, *Otchet general'nogo komissara*, 83; Sokolov, "Rossiya na vseмирnoy vystavke v SShA v 1893 godu," 212. George Kennan's trip to Russia in 1885–1886 to explore its exile system and his consequent articles in the *Century* later turned into a two-volume *Siberia and the Exile System* (1891) which is widely considered to have a significant influence on the American, and, more broadly, Western perception of Russia, making it stand as a despotic absolute monarchy which sends its educated intellectuals and capable individuals without trial for their opposing views on the future of the country. According to Saul, after his works "almost everyone traveling in or writing about Russia had to measure their perceptions against Kennan's," *Concord and Conflict*, 289.

²⁵ See Tat'yana Sanakina, "Materialy k rodoslovnnoy M.K. Sidorova i ego sem'i: po dokumentam Gosudarstvennogo arkhiva Arkhangel'skoy oblasti [Materials for the lineage of M.K. Sidorov and his family: On the documents from the State Archive of the Arkhangelsk region]," *Historical Courier*, no. 6 (2023): 13–25, <https://doi.org/10.31518/2618-9100-2023-6-1>.

actively cooperated with him. In his prime years, he became rich as well as sent raw materials and other articles to the World's Fairs of the 1860s and 1870s. His son Vasily studied botany at St. Petersburg University, and he kept an interest in this field since he seemed to actively participate in the so-called "Little Botanists" club, formed by recently graduated students of natural sciences. Sidorov took part in its semi-informal meetings and delivered speeches as well as scientific reports at least from 1886 to the mid-1890s.²⁶ Many of the participants of this club would later become prominent scientists specializing not only in botany but also in forestry, biology, and other natural sciences. While Sidorov did not become a scholar, instead he dedicated himself to writing poetry and dramas, publishing multiple volumes of his writings in the 1890s under the pseudonym *Vasily Otradin*. However, his works did not receive any noticeable recognition during his lifetime or later, though Sidorov was interacting with some of the prominent literary critics and artists of the time. He traveled extensively, having visited most European countries before his trip to America and having lived a considerable period of time in Germany. He eventually turned his writing skills into travel writing. Before the Chicago World's Fair, he published a volume describing his trip from Riga through western regions of the empire and Crimea to Constantinople as well as a travel account on Spain. After the Fair, he would additionally publish travel accounts on his trips across Russia, more particularly on the Volga and across the Caucasus, in which he not only wrote of his impressions but included a helpful list of sites and bits of advice for potential tourists. However, Sidorov became a tourist himself while visiting the Fair with a group of travelers from Austria-Hungary as part of a broader trip across the U.S. and Canada organized by the famous company, *Thomas Cook & Son*.

With the assistance of Muller, a Cook company's agent in Europe who accompanied the author until departure to the U.S., Sidorov and two of his fellow travelers set off from Vienna to Antwerp, meeting several other tourists upon arrival. From there they embarked on a steamer to New York. The group of ten tourists in total assembled in New York and, together with another Cook company's agent Zopernheim, throughout the summer of 1893 visited Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and the Fair itself before continuing to Toronto and Montreal. On their way from Canada to New York the group also visited Boston, and upon return to New York, the group voyaged back to Antwerp. In all American and Canadian towns, they stayed in pre-arranged hotels and enjoyed excursions organized by the company, while at times they also explored them on their own. Sidorov remarks that while before he conducted most of his travels independently and despite certain complaints he heard about tourism in organized groups, in the case of a trip to the Fair he decided to take Cook's services to "get

²⁶ Yakov Rikhter, Mikhail Glebov, and Tat'yana Rikhter, "Doroga v budushcheye: K istorii kruzhka «Malen'kikh botanikov» [A road to the future: The history of the 'Little botanists' club]," *Studies in the History of Biology* 10, no. 4 (2018): 34, <https://doi.org/10.24411/2076-8176-2018-11975>.

rid of thousands of small troubles which often considerably spoil the journey.”²⁷ It is worth mentioning that while Sidorov knew German and likely used it when interacting with his companions from Austria-Hungary, he did not know English, making his understanding of the country limited. On the other hand, unlike some of the Russian travel accounts on America at the time, his book does not bear the mark of approval by censorship, meaning that the censors who read his book after printing but before its circulation and sales did not raise objections on the basis to the 1865 Statute.²⁸ Apparently, he simply did not touch any potentially sensitive domestic topics, and the rules of the Statute seemed to allow him a fair degree of liberty in speaking his mind about America as the “Other.” Even so, the post-writing supervision by censors, the government’s regulation of publishers’ activities, and the inevitable editing or correcting of the account by the publishing company still indicate that the author’s writing was modified, let alone that he published his account only two years after the Fair, unavoidably reconstructing his experience. Nevertheless, Sidorov’s account, overlooked by travel writing researchers, can give an insight into the vision and understanding of America by Russians during a major World’s Fair and is of importance if one considers interest in America following the recent famine relief and demand for news and impressions from the Fair among Russian readership at the time.

Travel Conditions

According to Cook company’s package tour, Sidorov and his nine companions got first-class tickets on all railways and steamers throughout the trip, a ticket to

²⁷ Vasily Sidorov, *Amerika. Putevyye zametki i vpechatleniya [America. Travel notes and impressions]* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya A. Katanskogo, 1895), 2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian to English are my own.

²⁸ The 1865 Temporary Statute on Publishing marked a considerable change in the existing regulations for all printed materials. Instead of the fully preliminary censorship, now in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the two cities where a considerable part of publishers was concentrated, periodicals that got the approval of the Ministry of the Interior and paid a deposit, books with more than ten printed (160) pages, and translations over twenty printed (320) pages were not subject to preliminary censorship anymore. Now their publishers had to send copies of their already printed materials to the individual censors or censorship committees either two (monthly journals), three (books) days before or concurrently (periodicals) with the beginning of their sales/circulation. The censors could still initiate an independent judicial prosecution against authors or publishers violating the Statute rules and cancel the incoming or already existing circulation in case of finding something objectionable in the content of materials. That included derogatory comments about the Christian faith and the Orthodox Church in particular, any estate of the country, or the government on the whole, harassment or groundless insults against any person or their property, calls for sedition against the autocracy and the Imperial Family, as well as rude remarks about foreign monarchs or governments or propaganda of socialism. Sidorov’s book, which has over 400 pages and was published in St. Petersburg, apparently did not raise any of these concerns. On the Russian censorship, see: Charles Ruud, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804–1906* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), chaps. 9, 12; Natal’ya Patrusheva, *Tsenzurnoye vedomstvo v gosudarstvennoy sisteme Rossiyskoy imperii vo vtoroy polovine XIX – nachale XX veka [The censorship department in the state system of the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries]* (St. Petersburg: Severnaya Zvezda, 2013), 129–43, 334–35.

the Fair, and Zopernheim acting as a guide while in America and Canada. In the very beginning, the author immediately states that it is a pity that Russia is one of few countries in Europe that is out of “the Cook’s web” since this world-known company can organize tours to almost any location in the world and facilitates traveling, but, in his view, Russian hotels and travel organizations do not wish to make any concessions out of fear of losing profits.²⁹ The group was given places on the steamer *Friesland* of the Red Star Line, a joint American-Belgian company. Sidorov sees it as a “giant floating hotel” with three classes of comfort, the third one taken mostly by immigrants. While he made more general remarks about life during the voyage (enjoying the sunsets, describing passengers suffering from seasickness, and participating in a small ball organized on board with the cacophony of music and dances), he and his fellow travelers stayed dissatisfied with the provided food based on the American cuisine. Some of it proved to be stale from the start of the trip, and Sidorov believed the claims from other passengers that the food given by rival French or German steamer companies was much better, from the start comparing Europe and America.³⁰

The tourist group convened together in New York. Sidorov considered the people traveling with him as an important factor in the overall pleasure during the trip as comfort. While still in Europe he agreed with Muller’s statement that, at least, there were to be no British tourists who were infamous for misbehavior. Among his companions, there was an only woman from Vienna Ida Zelenweich who at first made Sidorov concerned about potential discomfort for both sexes, but in the end, he got friendly with her and cited many of her thoughts or remarks during the trip. There also was physician Nyulig from Hungary who often made sarcastic comments about the danger of crossing the ocean and later America overall. Other companions were officers from the Plzen 35th Regiment of the Austro-Hungarian Army, including its colonel Bohdan Rassl, its captain, and two lieutenants as well as landowner Lotsh, all from the present-day Czech Republic. Sidorov showed sympathy to all of the aforementioned companions, including to Czechs due to also being Slavs. In contrast, he reports that this assembled group of eight did not like the other two merchant tourists from Vienna with whom they met in New York. In addition, Sidorov and, according to him, the other seven tourists were irritated with Zopernheim due to his incompetence, arrogance, reluctance to show cultural institutions in cities, and, for Sidorov personally, being a Jew.

Nevertheless, in the New World Sidorov was impressed with all the hotels that he stayed in. Giving the most detailed description of the Central Broadway Hotel in New York, the author praises the level of comfort in the rooms – huge beds, a convenient washbasin, and electricity everywhere. In addition, the hotel provided a huge number of services to its visitors, such as a barbershop, a bookstore, a drugstore, as well as operating telegraph and telephone, while some of the rooms were so adorned that they looked like European palaces. He gives the biggest praise to what he called the “bar-room,” combining a restaurant for hotel visitors, a meeting place, and a cheap dining option for poor outsiders. Despite the hotel’s

²⁹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 8–9.

³⁰ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 52–54.

food not completely suiting what he dubbed “our European stomachs,” the hotel overall reminded him of a dream palace from *One Thousand and One Nights*.³¹ The author similarly commended the comfort of American domestic steamers that the group used during their travels. For instance, he notes the following about the *New York* on the Hudson River, again focusing on services and rich furnishings:

American steamers are rightfully called floating mansions. This is a multi-store house with wonderful verandas, hanging balconies, sparkling lounges that are especially well-decorated, with separate cabins for those interested, with huge canteens, a bar-room, a barbershop, a bathroom, with the sale of books, sweets, and other things, and with the orchestra playing all along. ... The lounges covered with expensive velvet carpets, set with wonderful furniture with bouquets of roses on the tables, luxurious lamps, and marble statues in the corners made us forget that we were on a steamer.³²

The impression of European tourists regarding American railways was more mixed. The group experienced riding in a Pullman car, but in a parlor instead of a sleeping car – the one consisting of two rows of chairs that could spin around their axis. Despite rich decor and the availability of toilets, smoking, and dining rooms, and despite admitting the overall good experience, the group found this car too narrow and the car’s plan not suitable neither for night trips nor for excessive luggage. Sidorov denied the popular claim that American trains only had one class for everyone, distinguishing between Pullman and the rest of the wagons, and to him, the interior of regular cars looked even less appealing. The train in addition sometimes went too fast, even though installed Westinghouse breaks and signalization ensured the safety of travel. Sidorov noted that there were no warning signs of the train leaving the station and that no conductor would ask the passenger to board, and he connects it to Americans from an early age getting used to thinking for themselves during their travels. In the end, the author, by citing the complaints of his companions, indicates the preference for European train travel.³³ Overall, it seems that the two major features of American travel as experienced by Sidorov, who paid for high-class accommodation and travel options, were the level of comfort and diverse services backed by technology, and both evoked constant comparison with Europe. In a way, this was an important part of “Amerikanizm” of Russian travelers both at the time and even later.³⁴

³¹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 117.

³² Sidorov, *Amerika*, 204–5.

³³ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 224.

³⁴ For example, the description of a hotel in New York in the prominent travelogue *One-Story America* (1937) by Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov contains almost identical wonder about the level of comfort and technological advances, see: Lisa Kirschenbaum, *Soviet Adventures in the Land of the Capitalists: Ilf and Petrov’s American Road Trip* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 50.

The Description of Nature

Sidorov included detailed and lyrical impressions of the landscapes, likely due to his interest in botany and experience as a writer. In the very beginning he marks the words of Muller who escorted them within Europe that while the New World is indeed grandiose and fascinating, one will not see true beauty there. Before the trip across the Atlantic Sidorov briefly praised the romantic Rhine, in the area of which he had lived for some time, and the greenery in Belgium. On board the steamer, despite all the discomforts, he was amazed by the endless ocean, the clear nights, and even the power of the ocean storm, while also describing the passengers' encounters with jellyfish and even dolphins on the way. He regularly uses poetic literary language when describing the sights and when sharing his impressions about cities and the Fair later. For instance, he depicts the beautiful view one could see while on board during the sunset:

The day looked as if it was melting in the ocean, and the waters carried away its shining coloration while burning with the gilding of the sun, the purple of the dawn, and the silver of the rising moon. ... The moon nights on the ocean are full of untold beauty, the melancholic thoughtfulness that the monotonous gliding of the waves give to them in this water desert, and this marvelous mystery that inspires our fantasies. The *Friesland*, painted with the silver of the moon, was dashing through the silvery waves like a giant bird. ... These fairy-like pictures, passing by like sweet dreams, couldn't be forgotten.³⁵

The first major description of American nature comes during the trip on the Hudson River to West Point on the steamer *New York* mentioned previously. While the author compared it with the Volga, his companions paralleled it with the Rhine. The conclusion written down by Sidorov was that while Hudson was wilder and more grandiose than the Rhine, it lacked romance since the latter had the relics of ancient and medieval architecture seen everywhere on its shores.³⁶ On the other hand, he gives a several-page description of the flora of the region, especially trees, which he humanizes and even includes their scientific names in Latin in footnotes. He recognized some of the trees as similar to those in Europe but still admitted that the herbs, the bushes, and the trees seemed both "like and unlike" compared to what he knew and probably studied as a botanist in St. Petersburg. This notion of the distinctiveness of American scenery only incited his interest and contradicted Muller's remark in the very beginning:

I gazed with pleasure at the greenery of forests, the velvet of grass, these tiny white asters that set up their umbrellas, the dusty plantain, yellow wood sorrels, and chamomiles around the roads and ditches. After crossing the ocean, the vegetation impressed the eye, and I was

³⁵ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 74–75.

³⁶ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 208.

completely glued to the peculiar flora of the New World, with its unknown children. I greeted my old acquaintances, the seeds of which were transported by wind, sea, or humans, while eagerly looking at the unknown natives.³⁷

He further extends the notion of similarity and simultaneous uniqueness when exploring the Philadelphia Zoo. Despite noticing the lack of organization regarding the exhibited animals, seeing unique South and North American species like buffaloes, grizzlies, and maikongs made him feel that the New World was truly different and independent from the Old not only in terms of flora and fauna but people as well. Later he revealed his passion for capturing and studying butterflies, as in Washington D.C. he spent a couple of evenings exploring and trying to capture some of them with one of his Czech companions and an American amateur butterfly hunter. Humanizing their appearance and behavior, he expresses wonder when he managed to catch one of the American moon moths that he could not get anywhere else. He confesses that if it was not for the tour, he would immediately buy a butterfly net and would stay in Washington exploring this “wondrous and amazingly colorful world of night fairies.”³⁸ Overall, he praised all the landscapes that he saw during his trip in both the U.S. and Canada. He and the group remained particularly amazed by Niagara Falls, where they decided to stay an extra day despite the time limit. Visiting the American and the Canadian Falls, Goat Island, the Three Sisters Islands, the Dufferin Islands, and the Burning Springs, the author denounced rumors about rip-offs as well as ubiquitous and annoying souvenir traders on the site. Instead, he and his group conveyed their fascination during their stay, and Sidorov again depicts American nature as unique and impressive even compared to European:

It is hard to say where the views of the waterfalls were the best. ... One couldn't take his eyes away and felt sorry for every minute spent on anything else. There was something appealing, powerful, unconquerable in this falling mass of water, something so captivating that anyone gets the urge to jump into these hitting waves, these roaring streams, these bubbling currents. ... The whole New World sees it as a duty to marvel at this wonder of nature, compared to which all well-known waterfalls in Europe are nothing but puny and powerless trickles.³⁹

American Cities

Sidorov and his companions went mostly through major eastern cities, and he depicted New York most extensively. He describes it as something exotic and alien even before landing:

³⁷ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 215.

³⁸ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 261.

³⁹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 341.

The whole of New York is a literal sea of huge, clumsy, and business-like houses that press each other and force some of the buildings to rise as towers to the sky. Some golden dome, a gothic bell tower, and a thick four-cornered tower stood above the condensed chaos of unattractive but impressive houses. And I looked and admired. Admired as if it was a rhino, a hippopotamus, or an elephant, marveling at its structure, its size, and its deformity.⁴⁰

Though its customs were deemed as irritating and primitive, New York was nonetheless perceived as the greatest city in America and of the grandest in the world, with colossal trade influence, a dozen major avenues, and hundreds of streets. Noise and hustle were the constantly mentioned feature of every area, whether it was Broadway with its rows of colossal buildings and an incredible number of stores that made it look like one huge market, or Brooklyn and its famous bridge where hundreds of steamers were constantly in motion, bringing heat, smoke, and soot, while the houses and endless factories looked like “formless stone masses.”⁴¹ The transport system, including elevated railways, further contributed to constant noise and movement of the mass of people while also degrading the appearance of the streets. In contrast to these two major city areas, Queens made the author think about a separate “cheerful and constantly hustling” city, containing all kinds of entertainment facilities from beaches and cafes to shooting ranges and what he called “Russian sleds,” in fact being a rollercoaster. While Sidorov and the group enjoyed themselves in this borough, the author disapproved of his experience in New York’s department store, “a gigantic bazaar” that was so noisy that it made one go crazy despite having all kinds of goods within it. He thought similarly of his visit to the stock exchange, where excited people seemed to behave almost like wild animals. This stock exchange, located on Wall Street, reinforced his apparently prior existing preconception of Americans as desperate for money-making:

The Americans bluntly call it [*Wall Street – author’s remark*] “the street” for its power and wealth. ... The one who at least once was tempted and tried his luck on this fatal street will leave it only when, dead, carried away from here forever. One who lost his fortune aims to get it back, the winner tries to double it, and all of them shout and dash like crazy in chasing the mighty dollar, and Wall Street has heard many groans, curses, screams of joy and thrill, but it is numb and cold, just like its marble columns and the fountains of its wonderful palaces.⁴²

Suffering from heat and hearing rumors about great parks in New York, the author visited Central Park, and while admitting its grand design and availability of

⁴⁰ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 107.

⁴¹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 144–46.

⁴² Sidorov, *Amerika*, 137.

many activities for athletes and youngsters, including baseball, he found it more business-like and less graceful and romantic than European major parks.

New York, nevertheless, was still more impressive than Philadelphia, where the author noticed a disarray of factories, telegraph lines, muddy streets with low-quality pavement that looked as bad as in distant localities in Russia, and many unattractive shacks. Despite praising its institutions like the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the philanthropic activities of the town, his impression remained unfavorable:

While several central streets near the City Hall, like Chestnut Street with its wonderful buildings and Broad Street with its pavement, are the exception, in the end, Philadelphia gave us the impression of a sweltering, dirty, undeveloped, and very unattractive town.⁴³

The first two cities presented a striking contrast with Washington D.C., where the group appreciated the absence of hustle and factories, lots of vegetation, broad streets, and charming buildings. These impressions also differed from Pittsburgh which the group passed on the way. Sidorov describes it as the “grandest factory center” covered with thousands of production plants, a mist of smoke, and a volcano-like stream of sparks that also has such a level of noise that it feels like “a seething hell.”⁴⁴

On the way back Sidorov and the company also visited Boston which he dubbed “American Athens” for its intellectual life. He connected many of the town’s educational and medical facilities as well as different kinds of social clubs and associations with the Puritan influence. He also noticed that Boston had many factories and docks that produced noise along with the constant movement of people and carriages on its streets. Unlike Philadelphia, however, this impression was smoothed by the central residential areas of the city which were reasonably quiet, and by visits to the City Hall (Old City Hall today), Faneuil Hall, Harvard, and the Boston Common, all of which got positive remarks. The view from the top of the City Hall, a picturesque seaside with connections between the peninsulas on which the city is located, and the balance between the greenery and the noisy business areas of Boston made altogether a pleasing picture.⁴⁵

Impressions of Chicago

Chicago, according to urban researchers, by the 1890s exemplified the growth and the contradictions of urbanization in America in general. By the time of the Fair, two decades after the 1871 fire, Chicago reaffirmed its status as the major logistical hub of the country as well as the center of lumber, grain, and meat packing while also developing the production of industrial products like steel and railways. Its cosmopolitan character due to immigration and newcomers from the countryside, the contrast between rising developed urban districts, concentrated

⁴³ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 232.

⁴⁴ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 277.

⁴⁵ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 383.

fabrics, and many transitory areas or outright slums, and that between riches and vices produced a variety of impressions from Americans and foreigners alike.⁴⁶

Sidorov, seeing at first many poor hovels, unattractive ditches, and a web of telegraph cables on the city's outskirts, did not even think that the train already entered Chicago. After Zopernheim said that they were already in the city, Sidorov reports how the entire group almost simultaneously exclaimed: "That is Chicago? It's gross!"⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Sidorov still called Chicago the "phoenix-city" that, following the major fire, as if by magic turned into a global center of meat and grain trade, while its gardens and brilliance similarly added to its status as the second city in the entire U.S. With thousands of people from all over the world arriving to see the Fair, Sidorov felt like Chicago turned into a real Babel. Colossal skyscrapers further strengthened this impression. The group got on top of the recently built Masonic Temple, the highest building in the town at the time, and Sidorov describes the opening panorama:

It's an immeasurable sea of houses pierced by the Chicago River, railways, and narrow streets, decorated by multiple green patches of gardens, parks, and squares, and limited by the blue Michigan filled by steamers, boats, and barges. It is hard to imagine a similar view. Thousands of fabric pipes rise up with their smoked obelisks, challenging the churches' belltowers, while the insanely tall buildings stand with their amazingly bold roofs along the stone chaos. I knew that America is a country of wonders and that here one has to stop all the time because of the fascination, but Chicago surpassed everything, and to be fair, this town is considered the greatest wonder here in the New World too.⁴⁸

The city was indeed huge and filled with endless activity. The group rode around its districts, often stopping to enjoy the local parks, especially Lincoln Park. However, the author heard from other fairgoers and overall confirmed in his mind that Chicago did not have any noteworthy cultural institutions like museums, monuments, or galleries. And while the city itself could be called a wonder, Sidorov was concurrently appalled by seeing much dirt, slums, and abandoned areas. He concludes that Chicago, despite all its grandeur and chic of the major streets like Madison Street and Michigan Avenue, feels more like a "half-western, half-eastern city," marking the East as inferior in his imagination of West/East dichotomy.⁴⁹

Sidorov and his companions also visited the infamous Union Stock Yards, a major meatpacking facility that ensured the role of Chicago as the center of cattle trade and already was an object of visit of foreign travelers, including Russians.

⁴⁶ David Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 45–46; Gilbert, *Perfect Cities*, 23–26.

⁴⁷ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 281.

⁴⁸ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 285–86.

⁴⁹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 287–88.

As if confirming his negative preconceptions against it, he left disgusted by the automatic and almost virtuoso order in which cows, sheep, and other animals were transferred and butchered by thousands per day and quickly prepared into different kinds of food even when their bodies were still trembling, and the blood flowing from their insides. Such a picture “paralyzed the brain, the heart, and the nerves,” implying the vision of American civilization as based on machinery at the cost of humanity.⁵⁰ Still, Sidorov’s impressions were somewhat softened after the visit to Pullman town next to Chicago. Though seeing it as lacking creativity, he still admired the grandeur of the undertaking (noting that grandeur seems to be a major feature for much in the New World) as well as the living conditions of the workers, admitting that what he saw was superior to worker’s life in Europe.

Overall, Sidorov makes varying remarks about American cities, but it is visible that they often represent something hard to comprehend from his constructed point of view as a European tourist, and things like noise, factory concentration, or skyscrapers are the object of mixed reaction of wonder and disapproval connected with concerns related to urban development lagging behind rapid industrialization and development of technologies and the effect of the latter on the mindset and lifestyle of city dwellers.⁵¹ These contradictory notions emerge especially clearly in Chicago, evoking both Sidorov’s awe and rejection by indicating it as non-western and thus inferior. It is notable that after he left Chicago for Toronto and found the latter city’s center filled with ads like in America, he nonetheless appreciated the absence of “seething life,” hustle, and the tranquility of its streets filled with wonderful greenery.⁵²

The Evaluation of the Fair

Sidorov and the group had in total of eight days according to Cook’s program to explore the fairgrounds. They decided to split and see the Fair separately, meeting together only in the Lexington Hotel or in the restaurant of the Old Vienna on the Midway Plaisance to rest and exchange their impressions. He describes the White City as a wonder and a “gleaming phantasmagoria” of statues, lakes, gondolas, and shops, noting huge crowds rushing to see the Fair that at first made it hard to orientate and get one’s act together:

Enormous waves of people come from all sides to all the entrances, to this colossal, diverse, universal town, to this mosaic market of all nations, “World-Fair” as Americans call it, to this distinctive masquerade of people and buildings, to these astonishing crowds, to this collection of wonders and curiosities of the whole modern world.⁵³

⁵⁰ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 298.

⁵¹ See Milla Fedorova, *Yankees in Petrograd, Bolsheviks in New York: America and Americans in Russian Literary Perception* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), 128–32. for an insight into Russian travelers’ perception of American technologies both at the turn of the century and in the 1920s-1930s.

⁵² Sidorov, *Amerika*, 356.

⁵³ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 315.

The author briefly writes about the Great Exhibit Halls, praising the exhibits of the Fisheries and the Horticultural buildings, but pointing out his slight disappointment with the Electricity Building with not much new inside. For him, the major feature of all visited buildings seemed to be grandeur and splendor, especially in the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, a “colossus” with an immeasurable number of items inside. While he did not write much about foreign exhibits except applauding the French elegance compared to the bulky and rather distasteful German pavilion in the Liberal Arts Building and briefly commending the Russian pavilion there, he visited some U.S. state buildings, praising them for allowing to get a glimpse on history and life in these regions when there was no time to visit them all. Sidorov paid considerable attention to the Midway Plaisance, describing it as a long international street filled with all types of attractions, cafes, and theaters, with never-ending music and dances of the people of the East and natives and an “indescribable diversity of costumes and types of people.” He visited the Lapland Village, the Chinese Theater, and Carl Hagenbeck’s animal circus, while also witnessing “typical and unattractive” belly dances in the Algerian and Tunisian villages. However, he was fascinated with what he believed to be the “original Eastern life” of Cairo Street, the ride on the Ferris Wheel, as well as the World’s Congress of Beauty that attracted all fairgoers. He also managed to visit the La Robida on the last day of his stay. Though he did not evaluate what he saw on the Midway on the whole, he still underlined its cosmopolitan character and diversity.

In contrast, he was absorbed by the items in the Fine Arts Building. Noting the popularity of Russian paintings, he at first was attracted to European works, but in the end admitted that the most interesting section was that of the host nation, noting the enormous number of interesting items, many of them looking different compared to “our Europe.” Nevertheless, he was in particular impressed by works of marine painter Thomas Alexander Harrison, as well as individual paintings like those of Irish-American artist Thomas Hovenden (*Breaking Home Ties*) and Charles Stanley Reinhart (*Awaiting the Absent and Washed Ashore*). While praising the grandeur of much of what he saw, Sidorov compared his experience with the 1889 Paris Fair that he also visited, again contrasting America and Western Europe in his mind and giving the preference for the latter:

However grand and splendid everything was, it still lacked the charm and coquetry that the French Fair was full of, making one forget that it was all temporary. While strolling around Japanese, Javanese, Indian, and Eskimo villages with all their decor, inhabitants, and home life I didn’t separate from the Fair’s surroundings and didn’t travel back to the homeland of these natives like in Paris.⁵⁴

He admitted that the Fair looked like a fantasy come true and a mix between a fairy tale and reality that compared the past with the present and with the probable future. The exhibits, the fairgoers, and the atmosphere made him feel like “one

⁵⁴ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 318.

of the pawns complementing this worldwide bazaar.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, when it was time to leave (exactly on 4 July), Sidorov was glad to do it due to exhaustion, endless crowds, and hustle. The salute in honor of Independence Day that the group saw before leaving Chicago marked a proper end for their visit which was evaluated by the author both as a “dream-like phantasmagoria” and as if at last being released from a “pressing and unconquerable nightmare.”⁵⁶

The Image of America

Sidorov displays his major conceptions about the U.S. upon arriving in New York and seeing the Statue of Liberty which served many Russian travelers both for outlining their prior prejudices and evaluating their own experience upon leaving the country.⁵⁷ He imagines it as a symbol of the New World’s charm that following Columbus’ expeditions tempted many to escape for the pursuit of happiness and away from the outdated and brutal norms of early modern Europe and the pressure of the authoritarian Vatican. These people brought with them the best from their home countries, forming the Republic. In addition, the Statue represents the improvements and reforms in American history. Now this sculpture lights the way for immigrants (many of whom were on the *Friesland*, anxious and afraid, but bracing themselves for the new life) “to the cities of freedom” of the young and great country representing a promised land, where everyone is equal, where all religions are tolerated, and where “the humanity grows hourly in its colossal creations.” Sidorov completed this idealized picture by confessing that he could not believe that he finally reached the New World, combining positive notions, whether pre-conceived or acquired throughout his trip, of American values, uniqueness of its history and geography, and its technological advances:

Yes, it was the New World that I eagerly read about in the novels of Cooper, Mayne Reid, and Gustave Aimard, the former country of red-skinned Indians where Mississippi, Colorado, and Missouri run, the country of former slavery, where stood Uncle Tom’s cabin mourned by our bitter tears on the pages of Beecher Stowe’s story, the country of plantations and prairies, buffaloes and wild horses, steppe dahlias and sunflowers, the birthplace of the beneficial potato, the country proud of the great names of its heroes Washington, Franklin, and Lincoln, the country that crushed and washed away slavery with the blood of compatriots, breaking its shameful chains and giving all benefits of freedom, the country of electricity, machines, and fairy-like inventions of Edison.⁵⁸

Sidorov focuses primarily on urban residents of major cities, neglecting writing about life in villages or smaller towns, and, for the most part, his descriptions

⁵⁵ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 322.

⁵⁶ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 336–37.

⁵⁷ Fedorova, *Yankees in Petrograd, Bolsheviks in New York*, 117–18.

⁵⁸ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 94–95.

were in the chapter related to New York, implying the image of life in this city on the entire country. He describes American preferences in food (crackers, oysters, different drinks but always with ice), the importance of newspapers for the average American, the abundance of ads that are necessary for any business or artist to attract the public, Americans' love for picnics and small trips, as well as their accommodation preferences (an ideal being a cottage outside of the central city areas). He was surprised by the uniformity of clothes worn by town dwellers and mentioned the development of window shopping among ladies and the system of subscriptions or memberships for different services, as well as underlined the unceasing interest of Americans in inventions and all kinds of petty things. He praised the innovative American education system that promoted the pupils' independence and practical skills compared to that in Europe and the parenting of children who were given an independent voice in the family and learned to bear responsibility and become self-sufficient from an early age. He additionally applauded the social mobility of the American society in general. Despite criticism of certain aspects of city life mentioned previously and despite that some of his companions could not see themselves living in American metropolises, Sidorov grew rather attached to what he saw, giving a positive contrast compared to Europe, especially in terms of technology and personal initiative, with the former again gaining a positive notion like earlier in the description of travel conditions and being "Amerikanizm" worthy of imitation:

I liked this freedom that allowed one to take risks. You want to build a twenty-story house – build it, no one will forbid it. ... That's why on American soil, where the laws of the old days don't limit or disenfranchise, there are so many wonders. ... That's why here giant ferries carry entire trains over rivers and waterways, that's why there are mind-boggling bridges, and the machines almost took over humans, why the transport is cheap and comfortable, why people value their time that we're wasting aimlessly and go forward, not only catching up to the Old World in a short time but often surpassing it.⁵⁹

However, he revealed more mixed opinions when writing about American religion as well as "high" and "low" culture. Sidorov was amazed by the number of churches but wrote mockingly about most city facilities closed on Sundays, as if forcing people to pay a visit to the church. He mentions that there are countless religious sects in the country, and each strives to attract as many people as possible, bluntly promoting themselves in the press and organizing secular social events for both newcomers and established members. But he disapproved of this practice and stayed repulsed after visiting churches where he saw well-dressed people organizing secular events within their walls, making it look more like amusement rather than serious piety. In the end, calling the entire religious tradition "hypocritical" and "insincere," he gives preference to Russia and Europe

⁵⁹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 143–44.

:

Continuously visiting churches during several boring Sundays, I got the most unfavorable impression from all these motley crowds, from this music, social tea, joint signing, pompous speeches, and all of this chatter aimed at attracting the public and getting on one's nerves.⁶⁰

A notable feature of his account is that during his visits to art galleries and the Fine Arts Building of the Fair, he gives a detailed description of some of the works that appealed to him. He and the group visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where, while collections of items from the pre-Columbus era were praiseworthy, the majority of paintings looked like imitations of European artists, with few memorable American works. Despite praising the American art section at the Fair, on his way back to Europe in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts the author similarly found little of interest produced by American artists. He notes that not only in terms of arts but also in general the word "European" seems to have the same importance to Americans as "American" to many Russians, underlining a presence of Russia-Europe-America triangulation in his imagination and admitting the interest of his countrymen in the New World. In terms of "high" culture, however, Sidorov aligns himself and Russia with Europe as supposedly superior:

All these copies have little interest to us, Europeans, but are dear to America, where arts have only just awoken, and where European great examples must influence the nature of the American, practical but still lacking poetic feeling, and rouse in him the love for the beautiful.⁶¹

He makes a similar comment regarding American music that is filled with popular examples but lacks something more elevated. Sidorov, in a quite derogatory way, explains it by the fact that most Americans spend their days in hard work and "chasing the dollar" and at the end of the day they require something more low-brow. Such a way of life influences even children, so that they "lose the poetic streak" in their childhood, and, unlike in Europe, soon become used to trains and electricity while laughing at those who would want to tell them "tales about fairies, wizards, and ghosts," again underlining the excessive impact of technology on a human being in America.⁶² However, he still envisions and hopes for the development of American "high" culture, appreciating Thomas Alexander Harrison as a recent example of a growing American painting school and naming major American literary classics. These developments make him believe that soon the U.S. will also present new famous musicians and overall get "the still missing halo of arts." In addition, despite disapproving of the influence of ads on the cultural taste of the "high" public, he found the custom of putting good art in public places worthy of imitation.

⁶⁰ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 196.

⁶¹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 177.

⁶² Sidorov, *Amerika*, 150.

He also visited several operettas and popular plays before the Fair. While thinking that in general America follows Europeans in theaters' repertoire and popular shows, he notes the prevalence of acrobatics, juggling, and low-brow performances compared to something more serious:

In this love for such amusements, one can see the English origin of Americans, and even though Germans sometimes organize serious musical evenings and events which are also popular among locals, they still can't replace boxing with kangaroos, fat-legged women playing leapfrog, and athletic exercises of clowns with their verses, dances, and gymnastics.⁶³

At the Fair itself, he reinforced these thoughts on American popular culture when witnessing Buffalo Bill's "Wild West Show" located next to the fairgrounds which enjoyed enormous popularity despite not being part of the Fair. Sidorov confessed that it reminded him of what he read in Cooper's and Gustave Aimard's novels and that one could not find "a performance that was more characteristic of the New World and the United States."⁶⁴ He also visited the opera "America" in the Auditorium Building. Produced by Hungary-born impresario Imre Kiralfy specifically for the Fair, it told the story of the Americas from the Columbus era to the present in live pictures and performances based on the idea of the rise of Progress, Peace, Happiness, Liberty, and other notions in American life. Sidorov was astonished at the end when the glorious culminating ceremony of all nations coming to the Fair and paying homage to the figure of America was suddenly interrupted by the performance of acrobats coupled with some popular music. He conveys his confusion:

Acrobats were wonderful and performed well, but I couldn't reconcile with allowing them on the scene in such a solemn minute. "That's how our public loves!" – I was explained. – "That's the New World!" And even though such an extravaganza ended with an apotheosis with the appearance of all nations and allegorical figures presenting the most beautiful picture, the acrobats ruined the impression. What can one do! America!⁶⁵

Overall, Sidorov strives to present himself as a cultivated person, mocking, though without insulting, American "low" culture and envisioning himself as superior in terms of "high" culture based on his implied identity as a European

⁶³ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 183.

⁶⁴ Not only Sidorov but many Europeans of the time were equally impressed with the "authenticity" of the show that also toured in Europe and thought of it as an important part of American mass culture, see: Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 116–17.

⁶⁵ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 312–13.

knowledgeable in arts, while disregarding activities among Americans that could be considered middle-class culture.⁶⁶

The author also comments on the position of different groups in American society. While on the *Friesland*, he met with a German woman who had already settled in the country and who praised it, including for the respect that women get in American society. Sidorov did not argue against these remarks, and later also lauded the development of female education. He briefly writes about the Chinese in America, who overall live in a secluded way, thinking of the U.S. only as a place for work while also enjoying opium and spreading its sales throughout the country. He does not write about Native Americans and instead pays extra attention to African Americans while in New York. He noticed that despite often wearing the same fashionable clothes as whites and despite that some of them already turned into a “black aristocracy,” they were in general avoided by whites and took a segregated and lower position in society. Sidorov also described how in one of the popular operas a white actor with a black-painted face parodied an African American by imitating sounds of different animals and caused “an endless furor” in the public when he brought soap and washed his skin back. The author liked African American music that reminded him of the mountain men of the Caucasus. However, he makes a couple of derogatory remarks himself, stating that the disregarding of African Americans by whites comes, based on his observations, mostly because of “their unattractive looks, their unpleasant smell during the summer, and their somewhat naive and child-like character,” while later in the Philadelphia Zoo he notes the popular rumor that jaguars in the wild prefer to attack non-white people due to the odor of their skin evaporation.⁶⁷ He sums up his impressions of African Americans as a whole rather than individuals, providing a racialized image:

I liked them, and the strange attitudes of white Americans to them puzzled me. A face black like that of a boot, curly hair, pupils that look like burning coal, unbelievably good nature, and peacefulness but also laziness, sluggishness, and stealing describe these “colored people” as they’re called in America since the title “black” is considered an insult.⁶⁸

Despite all these impressions, Sidorov did not write anything about the domestic or economic situation in the U.S. at the time. It is worth remembering that the Fair began at a time of panic which then led to a four-year economic depression

⁶⁶ Ilf and Petrov, though with a four-decade difference, positioned themselves in a similar way and did not mention developments in “middle-brow” culture, see: Kirschenbaum, *Soviet Adventures in the Land of the Capitalists*, 121.

⁶⁷ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 155–56, 242.

⁶⁸ Sidorov, 255; Russian travelers, whether from the late imperial or early Soviet period (including Ilf and Petrov) often generalized about African Americans based on what Kirschenbaum calls “romantic racialization”, see: Marinova, *Transnational Russian-American Travel Writing*, 115; Kirschenbaum, *Soviet Adventures in the Land of the Capitalists*, 95.

and occasional surges of unrest. Chicago similarly experienced its effect, with the famous Pullman strike in 1894, but even upon publication of the book in 1895, Sidorov did not mention anything about instability in America.

Instead, Sidorov left New York on the *Westernland* of the Red Star Line to Antwerp. Apparently, despite all the criticism, he formed a positive bias on the United States:

I was so sad to bid goodbye to the New World, I wistfully departed from these wonderful shores that are full of a different life and different views, where people's merits are acknowledged and benevolent freedom flows, and I kept looking on this disappearing land obscured by the sea.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, he mentioned cases when his companions voiced their preference for Europe upon arriving back, something that he still retained at least partially. Sarcastic doctor Nyulig from Hungary was delighted to see Antwerp's architecture following the experience abroad and eagerly compared it as superior to that in American cities, appreciating peace and quiet in comparison to "all this frenzy" across the Atlantic. In Cologne, Sidorov applauded the local hotel facilities which seemed equal, if not superior, to those in America, while Ida Zelenweich with whom Sidorov often talked, concluded in the final conversation with him: "No, our Europe is better, much better."⁷⁰

Photos and Mistakes

Lyrical descriptions of nature, cities, and what he saw at the Fair and in America are offset by the fact that, unfortunately, Sidorov's account does not contain a single photo or any other visual materials (he only mentioned that the tourists took a group photo before departure to America). To be fair, it was common for some Russian accounts of the Fair and many Russian travelogues of the late nineteenth century in general not to include pictorial representations, relying solely on literary descriptions that Sidorov tried to make captivating and expressive.⁷¹ Likely it had to do with avoiding potential additional costs of publishing (Sidorov did not include any pictures in his later travelogues about Russia as well). In addition, despite the evolving mechanization of the printing industry in Russia in the last third of the century as well as gradually rising literacy, primarily among peasants and the growing urban population, it was likely that not many among the latter two groups could afford richly illustrated accounts that

⁶⁹ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 403.

⁷⁰ Sidorov, *Amerika*, 422.

⁷¹ Saul, *Concord and Conflict*, 200.

could be several times more expensive compared to textual.⁷² Therefore, another reason for not including any photos was to make the book accessible to a wider readership and the possibility of selling extra copies and increasing the potential revenue of the author.

He has also made several mistakes, most related to dates. For example, briefly describing American history, he wrote that the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on 1 September rather than 1 January 1863 and that the Fifteenth Amendment was passed in 1868 rather than 1870. In addition, while he correctly noted that by that time the U.S. comprised forty-four states and had 444 electors, he wrongly stated that such a number of the latter was based on each state having ten electors.

Conclusion

Sidorov wrote from the constructed position of a European traveler visiting the country that he had formed preconceptions about while lacking knowledge of the language. He enjoyed its nature, rode through major eastern cities, and explored the Fair with his European companions. On almost all major subjects of his travel account, Sidorov links himself and his home country with Western Europe, evaluating and interpreting what he saw through its lens and pointing out what makes America as the “Other” different or similar. However, it seems as if to a considerable degree he does not go beyond the “mimetic capital” formed by earlier Russian travelers as well as major literary works about America who often described the American lifestyle in similar terms, with both negative and positive notions, and that even later writers like Ilf and Petrov accumulated in their travelogues four decades later.

It is visible that he views America as a country of rapid technological progress and industrialization that contribute to growing urbanization and the expansion of urban culture. Approving of American technological development in general and the level of comfort and services related to travel conditions, much about American freedoms, education, women’s position in society, and living and working conditions, he, like some earlier Russian visitors to the U.S., also reproduces Rogger’s concept of “Americanizm” that should be worthy of attention, if not imitation at home. In addition, to a degree due to his interest in botany, Sidorov outlines the uniqueness and magnificence of American nature.

While the Fair marked for him primarily grandeur, a characteristic often used when describing America, he still showed reservations about it compared to recent Fairs in Europe. In addition, he reproduces more ambivalent features of America which were also previously described by Russian travelers before him such as unfamiliar metropolises that evoke wonder, but due to the problems of the rising cities like noise, dirt, and concentration of factories – alienation and even

⁷² Irina Frolova, ed., *Kniga v Rossii, 1881–1895 [The book in Russia, 1881–1895]* (St. Petersburg: Rossiyskaya natsional’naya biblioteka, 1997), 40–45, 305–8; On the particularities of book printing, see: Innes Keighren, “Books and Print Technology,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs (London: Routledge, 2020), 354–64.

comparison with the East as inferior and the effect of technology and industrial work on American cultural preferences and overall humanity, the downsides of “Amerikanizm.” In addition, he openly displays his sense of superiority as a European in cultural affairs. In the end, Sidorov’s view of America is to a considerable degree based on what must have been his preconceptions and conclusions about America, and the Fair did not seem to have a decisive influence on the change of his notions while reinforcing others (such as general grandeur but also the peculiarity of American “low” culture). His account gives a somewhat superficial but still complicated picture of the United States (or at least a part of it) during the time of its major international exposition, with positive and negative displayed together and allowing Russian readers to make up their minds about America as the complicated “Other.”

About the Author

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