

Nov 04, 2016 by [Andrew Wulf](#)

Summer of “Splitnik”: Remembering the American National Exhibition in Moscow ^[1]

Last week I attended "Face-off to Facebook: From the Nixon-Khrushchev Debate to Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century", a conference sponsored by George Washington University's Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication at the School of Media and Public Affairs. The event was a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the American National Exhibition in Moscow and the infamous impromptu tête-à-tête that took place between Vice President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev.

What made this convocation of Cold War scholars, State Department diplomats and new media specialists so substantial from a historical point of view, was the presence of dozens of the original American guides who worked the exhibition in Sokolniki Park 50 years ago. As college-age Russian-speaking representatives of the United States, these cultural ambassadors formed the backbone of the six-week, multi-venue spectacle that aimed to offer a glimpse of American life to a Soviet citizenry wary of the West. These docents were often subjected to a range of hostile questions about the U.S. on such subjects as racism, violence and our lack of initiative on space exploration. Curiosity, trumped caution, however, as more than 2.7 million Russians visited the exhibition during the summer of 1959, including 140,000 who showed up on the final day of its run.

In one of the conference's morning sessions, Jack Masey, a designer of the American National Exhibition and author on the subject, offered a virtual curatorial walkthrough of the event. Stops included a visit to Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, in which the Charles and Ray Eames film *Glimpses of the USA* played on several giant screens lining the ceiling. Next was the Glass Pavilion that featured the exhibits of American products (corporate sponsors included RCA, Pepsi-Cola, Dixie Cup Co., IBM, Cadillac and Disney). Other thematic sections of the exhibition included the interior of a model apartment, pots and pans, books and magazines, nylons, beauty kiosks, a fashion show and American cars. Disney's "Circarama" invited visitors into a 360-degree cinematic experience of America, complete with Russian narration. An arresting footnote (of which there are many) from this exhibition was the sour reception of modern western art by the Soviet citizenry and Khrushchev himself, which included the impugning of Jackson Pollock's "Cathedral" and the sculptural work of Gaston Lachaise. But Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" photo exhibition in which one critic proclaimed "America showed the world to the world" was a rare success among visitors.

"You were a consumer society and we were a sacrifice society." These words from conference panelist Sergei Khrushchev (the son of the late premier, who referred to his father as simply "Khrushchev" throughout) spurred other impressions of the exhibition he had as a child: "... there was a huge expectation and we didn't know what would be there ... everybody remembered Pepsi-Cola, it smelled like shoe wax ... and the American books and magazines that you were allowed to touch and open."

It was the eyewitness testimony of William Safire, however — who at the time of the exhibition was a publicist for the model kitchen where "the debate" would occur — that illuminated a seldom-discussed back story to the Nixon-Khrushchev confrontation:

Berlin was the problem at the time. Communism would lose, capitalism and the free world would win. In retrospect, we project our certainty that we would come out the winners. At the time, the Soviets could have won the Cold War. We forget how close a race it was and how it could have gone either way. When we look back, it was a wholly different atmosphere. This was an event of strategic confrontation, not public diplomacy. The division of Berlin (and everything that accompanied that) was the problem. A year later, the Wall went up. But this golden fog we look back on was a real war between communism and capitalism. When these two strong men met, they knew how to play to the audience, but they were deadly serious. They could kid around about refrigerators, but the real issue was that the Soviets were going to close Berlin. The American concern was to reach the Soviet people — this was the public diplomacy, to tell what America was all about (as in Nixon's speech on freedom delivered at the exhibition). There, millions of people could see an American make the case for America. It didn't change Russian public opinion, but it demonstrated that maybe the enemy is only an adversary. That was the fundamental importance of the exhibition and the confrontation in the kitchen.

An afternoon session, entitled "The New Media in Today's Public Diplomacy," brought the conference proceedings into the 21st century. Professor Clay Shirky from NYU discussed the "the convening function" of the audience at the American National Exhibition and what that portends for future instances of public diplomacy. His main points, which clearly won over the audience to considerations for the future of American cultural diplomacy, were these:

- In the current upwelling of social, intellectual, political change, journalism is moving from a profession to an activity.
- The public can now talk back and with each other through networks over a particular subject.
- Phones are now plugged into networks. You don't ask who has internet access, you ask: who has a phone?
- All citizens are now participants.
- This is where we are with 21st century statecraft. It's not about control, it's convening of people who converse about these things. The real challenge is filter failure, not the information overload phenomenon.

Another afternoon speaker, Linda Gottlieb, a former 1959 exhibit guide and film producer, introduced the concept for a new government-sponsored Web site to serve as a person-to-person milieu for those looking to learn more about America but who may not be allowed to log on to www.us.gov in their home countries. Inspired by her experience 50 years before, Gottlieb invoked Edward R. Murrow's ideal of the human encounter in the war for hearts and minds, and suggested that new media, like her Web site, is indeed all about social networking and could serve to promote "enduring American assets."

This conference was a sobering, multilayered revelation as to how both the public and private

sectors worked in concert to create the American spectacle at Sokolniki Park in the summer of 1959. The person-to-person contact, in the shape of American guides and Russian visitors, proved successful at counteracting negative Russian stereotypes of America. Hans ("Tom") Tuch, a retired career diplomat who worked as the press and cultural attaché for the U.S. embassy in Moscow at the time, tidily summed up for the conference attendees the government's approach to its groundbreaking Cold War venture: "We must first understand the culture, the language, the history, the psychology and the motives of the people with whom we wish to communicate. We learned, and we communicated." As a direct result of this public diplomacy triumph, the USIA continued sending cultural exhibitions to the Soviet Union — up until the country's disintegration in 1991.

Next year the United States will participate in the Shanghai 2010 Expo. I urge the State Department and their private sector allies to follow a similar course from that of 50 years ago, by letting America show its enduring values without the pressure to be political in an unmediated, person-to-person engagement.

They should also curate a dazzling exhibition, for good measure.
