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The “Sokolniki Summit” Revisited

by Andrew Wulf

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INTRODUCTION

This paper revisits the American National Exhibition in Moscow, which for six weeks in the summer of 1959 showed more than 2.7 million Russians various aspects of the American way of life. Specifically, the paper studies the international political climate that motivated a national foreign policy to use a soft power instrument—in this case, a cultural exhibition—in order to raise awareness of America and its values among a Soviet audience.

It also investigates the exhibition itself and how this complex cultural diplomatic effort was intended to shape a very specific public opinion. The story of how the vision for this curious policy tool took shape is based on a variety of first-person accounts gathered at the George Washington University “From Face-off to Facebook: From the Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate to Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century” conference that took place on July 23, 2009, marking the 50th anniversary of the exhibition.

Throughout the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union found an outlet for their ideological tensions through shared cultural exchanges, which included exhibitions. Perhaps these earlier exhibitions hold important implications for current decision-making regarding the crucial American presence at the Shanghai Expo in 2010.

THE EXHIBITION: OF WHAT WAS THIS A CONSEQUENCE?

“If the cultural Cold War had a front line, Berlin was on it.”²

At the end of World War II, the Allied Powers divided a defeated Germany into four occupied zones. Analogously, the city of Berlin was split into four sectors and administered by the United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Less than a year later, disagreements over the administration of postwar Europe would lead to the end of the joint supervision of Berlin, making it a Cold War trouble spot over the next forty-five years. On March 5, 1946, during a visit to Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke of “these anxious and baffling times,” in reference to the mutual fear and suspicion brewing between the emerging superpowers of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

Not surprisingly, after the 1947 establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, Berlin would become a powerful symbol of the clash between capitalist West and the communist East. According to authors Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, it would serve as a:

...source of affront to the Soviets, this island of capitalism within their sphere of influence. For the others, it was both the tangible reminder of their victory and an ideal observation post for looking over the enemy's shoulder, a base for espionage and intrigue, a testing ground of Cold War tactics.³

Despite Churchill's strong advocacy for the "grand pacification of Europe," it would soon become obvious that a divided Berlin mirrored the larger more perplexing reality that an "iron curtain has descended across the continent."⁴

The United States would adopt an official stance toward the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe with the help of George Kennan's "Long Telegram," a cautionary analysis and profile of Soviet foreign policy objectives. This document, written by the American chargé d'affaires in Moscow, would set the foundation for America's policy of containment vis-à-vis the U.S.S.R. for the duration of the Cold War. Throughout the telegram, Kennan persuasively asserted that the Soviets held an innately antagonistic disposition toward capitalist countries, did not seek "permanent peaceful coexistence," and suffered from "a neurotic view of world affairs."

This landmark document would also promulgate the plight of Soviet Russians who had in a single generation suffered Stalin's Great Purge and the equally devastating effects of World War II. Kennan believed, perhaps rightly, that not only "have [the] mass of Russian people been emotionally further removed from doctrines of Communist party than they are today," he also averred that apparent Soviet expansionist aggression did not reflect the will of the citizenry:

First, it does not represent the natural outlook of the Russian people. Latter are, by and large, friendly to the outside world, eager for experience of it, eager to measure against it talents they are conscious of possessing, eager above all to live in peace and enjoy fruits of their own labor. Party line only represents thesis which official propoganda machine puts forward with great skill and persistence to a public often remarkably resistant in the stronghold of its innermost thoughts. But party line is binding for outlook and conduct of people who make up apparatus of power—party, secret police and

Government—and it is exclusively with these that we have to deal.⁵

However, concern for a distant and unreachable Soviet public would be muted for the next ten years while the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. continued to spar over Berlin.⁶ On June 20, 1948, the Western Allies introduced the new Deutsche Mark in their sectors, thereby replacing the defunct Reichsmark, in an ongoing effort to jumpstart the postwar German economy. Nestled deep in the Soviet sector of East Germany, the still-united Berlin would become divided by the Soviets, who declared the British and the Americans had enacted an economic policy without first consulting the U.S.S.R. Days later, the Soviets reacted by imposing a complete blockade of western Berlin, cutting off all access by road, rail and water. Historians argue whether the U.S.S.R. was hoping for a land-grab in order to absorb the western sectors of the city into their sphere of influence. This was not to be. The U.S. countermeasure, an airlift, would serve as the lifeline to the western portion of the city, with more than 270,000 flights in total delivering food and fuel to the besieged city. In May of 1949 Stalin lifted the blockade, and the West's propaganda "by deed"⁷ cemented West Berlin's status as a symbol of freedom in a city that would remain politically divided until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Set against the backdrop of the Truman Doctrine, which advocated containment of Soviet aggression anywhere in the world, and the Marshall Plan that aimed to rebuild the countries of Western Europe (with the additional aim of fending off Soviet ideological advances), Kennan's diplomatic vision of managing the Soviets through political, economic and military pressures would soon be eclipsed by a harsher approach to Soviet containment. In 1950, Paul Nitze, Director of Planning for the State Department, authored the hawkish NSC-68 document that strategized a fierce military superiority over the Soviets.

The inauguration of Eisenhower in 1953 would bring with it the push for America to conceive a formalized plan for a new information agency. Familiar with the perils of modern warfare and the benefits of peaceful propaganda, this new administration would create the United States Information Agency (USIA), a bureau removed from but sharing in the concerns of the State Department. Its primary mission, as decided on October 24 of that year:

...shall be to submit evidence to peoples of other nations by means of communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace.⁸

This same year would witness the death of Marshal Stalin, the end of the Korean War, and the introduction of yet another new protagonist on the political stage: Nikita Khrushchev. He would spend the next four years consolidating his role as leader of the U.S.S.R. while easing repressive government action in his de-Stalinization programs.

In June of 1953, East Berlin construction workers would strike in protest of state-mandated work quotas. The uprising, brutally crushed by Soviet troops, would lead to the opening of refugee camps in West Berlin, which offered safe haven to those fleeing Soviet repression. From 1949 through 1961, almost three million people would leave their homes in East Germany to escape to West Berlin. By the late 1950s, at the time of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, the East German "brain drain" would become the dominant political issue between the United States and the Soviet Union.

THE AGREEMENT

On December 8, 1953, President Eisenhower formalized his wishes for the peaceful use of nuclear energy in an address to the United Nations General Assembly. During the next two years, the USIA would convey the President's message through the "Atoms for Peace" exhibition that traveled the globe, from India to Italy, from Brazil to Britain. Its goal, to allay fears of the atomic bomb and to indirectly pressure the U.S.S.R. to an agreement concerning the safe sharing of nuclear technology, was realized as a public diplomacy triumph. The success of this exhibition to deliver a more human side to the atomic arms race would initiate the long-term practice of museum-quality exhibitions as American foreign policy tools for the next forty years.

In 1955, the Museum of Modern Art's *Family of Man* exhibition, which featured more than 500 photographs from 68 countries, was hailed by American poet Carl Sandburg, who wrote, "If the human face is the 'masterpiece of God' it is here then in a thousand fateful registrations."⁹ Following the original exhibition's success in New York, the USIA adopted the show and toured it in various formats on a goodwill tour to 38 countries over the next six years. In 1956, another USIA exhibition, entitled "People's Capitalism—A New Way of Living," was installed at the Bogotá Trade Fair in Colombia, where it was enthusiastically received. According to Nicholas J. Cull, the Soviets reacted differently:

In the U.S.S.R., the editor of *Pravda* (and soon-to-be foreign minister) Dmitri Shepilov fumed that "People's

Capitalism” made as much sense as “fried ice,” and in the summer of 1956 the Kremlin commissioned economist Eugene Varga to refute the concept in two five-thousand-word articles for its international journal *New Times*. Moscow was worried.¹⁰

The rationale for East-West exchanges would near official status in a Statement of Policy by the National Security Council on June 29, 1956:

- a. To promote within Soviet Russia evolution toward a regime which will abandon predatory policies, which will seek to promote the aspirations of the Russian people rather than the global ambitions of International Communism, and which will increasingly rest upon the consent of the governed rather than upon despotic police power.
- b. As regards the European satellites, we seek their evolution toward independence from Moscow.¹¹

In 1957, after Congress removed the fingerprinting provision of the Immigration and Neutrality Act from five years prior, relations between the Cold War adversaries had shifted, according to veteran American diplomat Walter Roberts, from “the freezer to the refrigerator.”¹² A year later, the “Agreement between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical and Educational Fields” was officially enacted. One of the key points of this negotiation was the shared cultural programming of the United States and the Soviet Union. Importantly, the negotiations allowed for direct contact between Americans and Russians, an unprecedented element of the treaty that the Soviets had tried to avoid.

In the long tradition of world’s fairs dating back to the Great Exhibition in London of 1851, the Universal and International Exposition in Brussels in 1958 proved to be yet another opportunity for nation-states to show the best that their cultures had to offer. The

U.S. pavilion was designed in anticipation of the strong showing by both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The American section included an atomic energy display, fashion shows, film screenings, an American "streetscape," and contemporary abstract art. A controversial inclusion in the U.S. pavilion was the "Unfinished Business" exhibit, a conceptual experience that revealed outright the unresolved social problems plaguing America at the time, namely race relations. Spurred by the Soviets' vocal disapprobation of the school desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, USIA planners effectively portrayed America as a nation that understood its work as a global superpower was not yet finished. The walkthrough gallery space featured American guides who answered the difficult questions about the then pressing racial issues at home. Surveys showed that Europeans appreciated the candor and overall message of the display: America may not be perfect, but it is making progress.

The monumental work of representing America overseas at the Brussels Expo would soon be adapted for the first official cultural exhibition exchange under the new agreement with the Soviets the following year. But what would America show of itself in Moscow, the capital of its political adversary?

Jack Masey, a designer of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, has written:

American industry, severely retrenched in the Depression of the 1930s, had been reinvigorated through the production of war materiel. Spared Europe's challenge of rebuilding a devastated industrial sector after the end of the Second World War, the U.S. economy had retooled itself for domestic production; by the 1950s, it was experiencing unprecedented growth. The products of industry and how they impacted on the lives of ordinary American citizens was a wholly valid subject.¹³

Amidst all the pomp and grandiosity of vision for the upcoming exhibition—the largest and most complex the USIA would ever execute—the exhibition designers had no way of predicting the importance of one of these products of industry: the ready-made kitchen unit by General Electric, and the vital role it would play in Cold War public diplomacy.

ON DISPLAY: THE FORBIDDEN FRUITS OF THE WEST¹⁴

At the end of the 1950s, Russians were no strangers to American culture. The desire to learn about the U.S., the main rival of the U.S.S.R., trumped caution, however, as Masey and Morgan point out:

The Russians' insatiable curiosity about Americans—and all things American—is understandable given the demonization of the USA in the Soviet press, the lack of contact with foreigners in general, and the boredom of everyday life under the Soviet system.¹⁵

For years there had been a broad cross-section of Soviet society listening to Voice of America radio broadcasts that escaped government jamming and a readership avidly devouring the USIA's *Amerika* magazine, both of which gave, at best, a partial view of the life and times of U.S. culture. In the year leading up to the arrival of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, U.S. cultural infiltration in the Soviet Union included the politically-charged visits by American musicians Van Cliburn, the young Texan who became the first American to win the Tchaikovsky International Piano Competition, and Paul Robeson, the left-leaning African-American basso profundo who captured the hearts of the Soviet citizenry. Other cultural visitors from the U.S. at the time confirmed Russian enthusiasm for all levels of American culture, as was demonstrated by their warm reception on separate occasions of both Bob Hope and the Harlem Globetrotters.¹⁶

The official goal of the American National Exhibition in Moscow (ANEM) was to actualize the U.S.-U.S.S.R. cultural agreement of 1958. According to American diplomat Hans Tuch, it served to present the Soviet public with a complete picture of American society.¹⁷ On another level it served as an offensive weapon to show how the "Americanness" of everything from architecture and automotive engineering to modern art and mass-produced kitchens was superior to the Soviet version. The designers of the exhibition well knew that the Soviet Union could boast an advantage in the fields of rocketry and physics—the launch of Sputnik two years before solidly positioned the Soviets as frontrunners in the "space race." The exhibition organizers were also savvy to what historian David Caute calls the "Soviet sensitivity about economic efficiency, technological advance, production statistics, and housing standards," which Western students of Soviet communism identified as a Russian inferiority complex. Caute asserts:

...even in the age of the H-Bomb, the Sputnik, and the supersonic Ilyushin, the Soviet state was forever struggling against underdevelopment, both real and feared, reinforced by self-imposed insulation against the global market. The Western press relentlessly mocked hyperbolic Soviet claims to have invented the world and everything in it.¹⁸

The exhibition itself was set on a spectacular scale. The visitors' entrance hall consisted of an enormous geodesic dome based on the Buckminster Fuller design that had proved a success at the United States pavilion at the Jeshyn International Fair in Kabul, Afghanistan three years earlier. Jack Masey, Chief of Design and Construction of the ANEM, and his team considered it an appropriately ostentatious reference point from which the Soviet visitors could then explore the exhibition: "...it was decided that the dome would be the central statement, functioning as a kind of 'information machine...'"¹⁹

Upon entering the dome, visitors were greeted by Charles and Ray Eames' film *Glimpses of the USA* that played on several giant screens lining the ceiling. Tasked by exhibition organizers to "...create a visual proof of the abundance of American society,"²⁰ the Eameses were already expert in delivering elegant propaganda cinema to American exhibitions abroad. Their animated "Information Machine" film, created for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, had impressed visitors the year before. Designer Peter Blake describes what the visitors saw upon entering the dome:

The story told in film was simple: two typical days in the life of America—a typical weekday and a Sunday. The images, always in tandem, were of ordinary things: people waking up, having breakfast, going off to school or to work, having lunch, coming home, and so on. There were scenes of play, of worship, of art shows, of sports, of traffic jams (and interminable highway intersections), of travel—trains, buses, planes—of innumerable details that added up to a rather routine travelogue of the U.S.A.²¹

Before exiting the dome, visitors were invited to approach the IBM-sponsored display, which featured a computer programmed to answer questions about the United States, including topics that illustrated some of the less palatable truths of American society. Examples from the first few days of the exhibition included:²²

- *What is the price of American cigarettes?*

It varies from 20 to 30 cents. The average semi-skilled worker earns enough money in one hour to buy about eight packages.

- *What is meant by the American dream?*

That all men shall be free to seek a better life, with free worship, thought, assembly, expression of belief and universal suffrage and education.

- *How many Negroes have been lynched in the United States since 1950?*

Seven deaths—six Negroes and one white—have been classified as lynchings since 1950 by the Tuskegee Institute, a Negro college. Responsible Americans condemn lynching and the perpetrators are prosecuted.

- *What is the average income of the American family?*

\$6,100 in 1957.

Next on the tour was the Glass Pavilion that featured exhibits of American products. Corporate sponsors included RCA, Pepsi-Cola, Dixie Cup Co., IBM and Cadillac. Here visitors would encounter thematic sections of the exhibition that included the interior of a model apartment, pots and pans, books and magazines, nylons, beauty kiosks, a fashion show and American cars. Americans working at the exhibition reported the expected daily attrition of Levi's jeans and reading materials, including Bibles and Sears Roebuck catalogues.²³ Sergei Khrushchev, a panelist at the George Washington University conference commemorating the 50th anniversary of the ANEM on July 23, 2009, visited the exhibition with his father on the day of the "kitchen debate." He succinctly recalls his first impressions:

There was a huge expectation and we didn't know what would be there. Books you can touch and open. Everybody remembered Pepsi-Cola, but it smelled like shoewax. Our life was not a consumer society but a sacrifice society for the future.²⁴

One of the more compelling subplots from the exhibition was the presence of American fine art and its reception by the Soviet visitors. Curated by a jury of art professionals selected by the USIA, including Lloyd Goodrich, the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the display was to show a selection of the best

American art from the late 19th century up to the present. Well aware that current Soviet trends in artistic aesthetics veered heavily toward Socialist realism—not to be confused with Social realism, a school of art which celebrated a forthright depiction of working class realities—the jury proceeded to corral a diverse assortment of American art that could “...match the Russians technically, could treat their subjects with imagination, were free to experiment with treatment and style, and could express themselves according to their own personal convictions and whims.”²⁵ President Eisenhower, himself a layman painter, declared certain works chosen, such as Jackson Pollock’s “Cathedral,” Jack Levine’s “Welcome Home” and Gaston Lachaise’s “Standing Woman” as challenging to traditional aesthetics.

Having already quelled an attempted witch-hunt by representatives of the House Un-American Activities Committee who saw communist tendencies among the U.S. contemporary artists, the jury agreed, at the President’s bidding, to add works from America’s pre-World War I artists, which included paintings by Childe Hassam, George Caleb Bingham and John Singer Sargent. Historian Michael L. Krenn argues that though some Soviets, including Khrushchev, felt the abstract art was worthless since it failed to respond to the education of the proletariat, the mandate of Socialist realism, overall the American art display at Sokolniki Park made visitors think more philosophically about life and attitudes in the United States:

In Moscow there was no doubt among the Russians who viewed the exhibit that it was completely and definitively American. For the crowds that gathered around the paintings in Moscow, it was really more of a question of exactly what *kind* of America was on display.²⁶

Indeed, at the very least, abstraction in art symbolized in the words of Frank Getlein, art critic for the *New Republic* who visited the show, the freedom of artistic expression all artists enjoyed in

the U.S. Though the American art exhibition remained a source of contention and even derision among visitors, it was deemed by organizers as a success. Importantly, it countered the Stalinist-era aesthetic that continued to champion communist ideals of life in the factory and field, military heroes and state leaders until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Other elements of the ANEM included some "greatest hits" of former American exhibitions. These included Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" photo exhibition, recycled from the Brussels World's Fair the year before, and Disney's "Circarama," a film that invited visitors into a 360-degree cinematic experience of America. Also on the visitors' agenda were a complete and operational RCA television studio and a model American home, dubbed "Splitnik," since it was divided down the middle to provide a path for the millions of visitors over the six-week run of the exhibition. This installation also included the kitchen that would, unsuspectingly, host one of the great rhetorical battles of the Cold War.

Historians of Cold War history have given due weight to the domestic politics of producing this challenging exhibition, to the spectacle of modern design on display, and of course to the dramatis personae of the "kitchen debate." However, only recently have cultural historians explored in greater depth the effect that real Americans, mostly in the form of exhibition guides, had on the Russian visitors. Dozens of these guides who worked the exhibition fifty years ago participated at the 2009 Summer Conference at GWU. As representatives of the United States, these cultural ambassadors formed the backbone of the six-week, multi-venue spectacle which aimed to offer a glimpse of American life to a Soviet citizenry wary of the West. Hans Tuch describes the effect of the young American guides at the Moscow exhibition:

What made the show comprehensible to Soviet visitors were the Russian-speaking American guides. They showed the literal face of America. 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.²⁷

These docents were often subjected to a range of hostile questions about the U.S. on such subjects as racism, violence and the lack of American initiative on space exploration. Indeed, the theme of "information machine" continued through the "live exhibits" of these Russian-speaking U.S. citizens. It was this human element that offered Moscow's urban population a genuine connection with a side of American life they could not have known otherwise. Guide Tatiana Sochurek today celebrates the presence of the guides: "If you went from guide to guide you got a different story. I hope that we as guides became believable in stating these things." Another guide, George Feiffer, offers a different take on the work of the guides: "We continued to see Russia as Stalinist, but it was not Stalinist. It was on the way to improving, slowly, staggeringly to a richer, more humane society. They needed encouragement, not a slap in the face. We slapped them in the face." Perhaps guide Linda Gottlieb, in a reference to Edward R. Murrow's idealization of public diplomacy as person-to-person contact, remembers that "...many felt *we* were those last three feet."²⁸

President Eisenhower reflected in his memoirs on the importance of the American guides at the ANEM:

Our Moscow exhibition served a constructive purpose by bringing thousands upon thousands of Soviet men, women, and children face to face with the products of American industry and above all with American citizens. I was particularly impressed with reports of the group of outstanding United States college students who served as guides and who day after day stood up and in fluent

Russian fielded questions of the greatest diversity about life in the United States. In fact, these bright young men and women so impressed their hearers that when some trained Communist agitators began infiltrating the crowd and throwing loaded questions, friendly Russians in the audience would help out by supplying answers in loud whispers.²⁹

THE ELEPHANT IN THE KITCHEN

William Safire offers a lucid appraisal of the meeting of Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Khrushchev at the exhibition:

So, here you have all these things happening that you look back on now in a kind of golden fog. But the golden fog we look back on was a real war between communism and capitalism. And that's why when these two strong men met, they were deadly serious. They could kid around and talk about refrigerators and things like that, but there was a clear warning on the table from the Soviet Union that they were going to close off Berlin.³⁰

There is a scene near the end of the 1970 Oscar-winning classic *Patton*, in which the vainglorious American general played by George C. Scott insults a Russian officer at a celebration marking the defeat of Nazi Germany. After some tense moments, the Russian in turn degrades the American hero, and the two stare each other down as they toast knowingly not only the end of World War II but the beginning of the Cold War.

Nina Gilden Seavey, Director of the Documentary Center at GWU and a speaker at the conference, characterized the tone of the meeting of Nixon and Khrushchev at the ANEM as remarkably symbolic of the “40 year-old winter between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.” She described the behavior of these two leaders, particularly during their ideological sparring that led them from the RCA television studio installation to the model kitchen, as not unlike the above cinematic anecdote: “...we fought and then we embraced...we fought and then

we embraced...this became a symbol of our relationship.”³¹ During his visit to the exhibition at Sokolniki Park, Khrushchev himself would playfully brand his exchange with Nixon as “a communist spokesman dealing with a capitalist lawyer.” Such levity, however, masked a looming international crisis of chief importance to the Cold War superpowers.

One of the more arresting eyewitness testimonies during the one-day conference at GWU was by William Safire, who worked as the press agent for General Electric at the model kitchen where the confrontation between Nixon and Khrushchev—“Nik and Dick” as they would be dubbed—would take place. According to Safire:

The problem at that time was Berlin. And the key to Khrushchev was to solve his Berlin leak, the leak of the talent of East Germany back into West Germany. And people were leaving all the time through Berlin. And this was a running sore, as it were, because all the brains and all the entrepreneurial excitement were feeding out through Berlin. And so his threat at the time was to turn over operations of entry and exit of Berlin to the East German government. Sure enough, a year later, the Berlin wall went up.³²

Safire himself overheard much of the rhetorical jousting between Nixon and Khrushchev. Also present was the entourage of reporters who leaped at the opportunity to document the impromptu, now legendary, exchange. Nixon apparently had felt slighted by the Soviet premier’s comment moments earlier in the television studio that “...in another seven years, we will be on the same level as America. When we catch you up, in passing you by, we will wave to you.” Looking to gain a foothold in the argument, the American Vice President’s team redirected the official tour of the exhibition so that it would bottleneck in the middle of the model home. Safire, on hand to publicize the efficiency of the polished and glittering domestic appliances enjoyed by average Americans, was responsible

for taking one of the iconic photos of the two principals as they found themselves trapped—to Nixon’s delight and Khrushchev’s discomfort—in the General Electric kitchen.

In front of dozens of onlookers, Nixon leaned into the display and took the Soviet premier to task, proclaiming the ingenuity of home design in the U.S. capable of improving the lives of millions of Americans. Some selected portions of the twenty-minute “kitchen debate” were reported by eyewitnesses:

Nixon: I want to show you this kitchen. It is like those of our houses in California.

[Nixon points to dishwasher.]

Khrushchev: We have such things.

Nixon: This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women...

Khrushchev: Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under communism.

Nixon: I think that this attitude towards women is universal. What we want to do, is make life more easy for our housewives. This house can be bought for \$14,000. Let me give you an example that you can appreciate. Our steel workers as you know, are now on strike. But any steel worker could buy this house. They earn \$3 an hour. This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on a contract running 25 to 30 years.

Khrushchev: We have steel workers and peasants who can afford to spend \$14,000 for a house. Your American houses are built to last only 20 years so builders could sell new houses at the end. We build firmly. We build for our children and grandchildren.

...

Khrushchev: I hope I have not insulted you.

Nixon: I have been insulted by experts. Everything we say [on the other hand] is in good humor. Always speak frankly.

Khrushchev: The Americans have created their own image of the Soviet man. But he is not as you think. You think the Russian people will be dumbfounded to see these things, but the fact is that newly built Russian houses have all this equipment right now.

Nixon: Yes, but...

Khrushchev: In Russia, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. You are entitled to housing...In America, if you don't have a dollar you have a right to choose between sleeping in a house or on the pavement. Yet you say we are the slave to Communism.

...

Khrushchev: On politics, we will never agree with you. But this does not mean that we do not get along.

Nixon: You can learn from us, and we can learn from you. There must be a free exchange. Let the people choose the kind of house, the kind of soup, the kind of ideas that they want.³³

Soon after these comments were made, the face-off in the kitchen subsided and both protagonists reverted to the goodwill that became the hallmark for the cultural exchange agreement between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. It would become glaringly clear, however, that what Khrushchev and Nixon were saying on that fateful afternoon in Moscow represented much more than the strong wills of expert politicians from opposite sides of the ideological fence. As journalist Marvin Kalb explains, "Russia was at a pivotal moment in its history. Moving on from Stalin, this exhibition was opening the door to the world for many Soviets. What Khrushchev and Nixon were saying was so reflective of what their two countries represented, or wanted to represent."³⁴

At the end of his visit to the Soviet Union, Nixon was able during a television and radio address to talk directly to the Soviet people. This separate media event should not be forgotten, for it gave the Russians an opportunity to hear, directly from a high-ranking American leader, about American values. As Safire notes:

It didn't change Russian public opinion, but it made people think that maybe the enemy is only an adversary. And maybe frankly, some of the things they've got going over there [in the U.S.] will help a steelworker have a home and not the same home as every other steelworker. That's what I see as the fundamental importance of that exhibition and that confrontation in the kitchen....

Just as the American guides in the ANEM, Nixon put a positive spin on not only the American identity but on the Cold War itself. While echoing Eisenhower's lament over the mutual suspicion between the superpowers that had reached critical levels leading up to the exhibition, specifically over the Berlin question, the Vice President could be heard championing cultural exchange—specifically people exchange—as a means for lessening tensions between the Americans and the Soviets. This was a time when neither the U.S. nor the U.S.S.R. could foresee a peaceable outcome for their warring political systems. It would be the interaction of people from both systems (American guides and Russians citizens) which would illustrate the indelible, and fragile, human realities underlying the conflict.

THE FUTURE: FIFTY YEARS LATER

This summer the United States will participate in the Shanghai 2010 Expo. Though the USIA no longer exists as the cultural diplomacy agency of the U.S., it is hoped that the State Department and its private sector allies will follow a similar course from that of fifty years ago, by letting America show its enduring values without the pressure to be political in an unmediated, person-to-person engagement. These values, according to Linda Gottlieb, one of the guides from the ANEM, include: pop culture, knowledge base, inventiveness, and a diverse and open society.³⁵

Tomas Tolvaisas, a panelist at the conference, suggested we see the ANEM as “a great communicator” for having:

...set a foundation for the following exhibitions that visited the Soviet Union through 1991. The guides were insanely, irresistibly attractive. Due to budget constraints, smaller exhibitions would follow, travel throughout the USSR and be shown throughout Eastern Europe, at trade fairs or solo exhibitions. These other exhibitions were bridge-builders between 1959 and the 21st century. The guides broke mental barriers, and created an environment of free exchange. It was freedom of speech on display.

As the Soviet Union continued its effort at de-Stalinization under Khrushchev, Russians found themselves at a poignant moment in their history. Not only did this exhibition open the U.S.S.R. and its citizens to the reality of America, it also showed the human face behind the politically divisive, state-sponsored rhetoric.

An afternoon session at the July 2009 GWU conference, entitled "The New Media in Today's Public Diplomacy," brought the discussion into the 21st century. Professor Clay Shirky described the "the convening function" of the audience at the ANEM and what that portends for future instances of public diplomacy. His main points concerning the future of American cultural diplomacy were:

- In the current upwelling of social, intellectual, and 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.³⁶

Conference panelist Linda Gottlieb advocated the increased use of the tools of the Web 2.0 age. In her opinion, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, assorted iPhone applications and other new media—"could be the *new* last three feet" of public diplomacy. On the other hand, she paused to question the usefulness of this suite of services and technologies, in vogue for the last few years, as to just how these existing platforms can be leveraged to promote public diplomacy today. Ultimately, it can be argued, these new communication modes serve to bring human beings face to face over common concerns. If new media is about social networking, and if social networking works best in real time encounters, then the example of the American guides and their interactions with the Soviet visitors illustrate the exhibition's success and lasting legacy.

On a more serious note, the Obama Administration has found itself situated in an Augean stable of economic depression, dangerous international scenarios and big questions as to how to revamp and refocus the cultural element within public diplomacy. The President, to his credit, has stated that he will chart a different foreign policy path from the Bush administration, one based on a multilateral diplomacy that respects the world rule of law. This remarkable opportunity to turn things around must also include a substantial cultural diplomacy plan. The question on the table is how will the Obama administration restart this process of introducing America, warts and all, to foreign audiences? There is an obvious need for Americans and citizens from other countries to know one another. And one can learn much from the rich history of the USIA and the talented individuals who imaginatively represented America abroad during the agency's operating years from 1953 to 1999.

Shanghai (and what America will show of itself there) is certainly a puzzle. It is clearly one of the most important "world's fairs" the U.S. will ever attend. As part of the American contribution, there is currently a recruitment for young, Chinese-speaking American guides who will engage in genuine person-to-person contact with the Expo visitors. This up-close and personal piece, interfacing with Chinese moderates and intellectuals, is something that should be taken advantage of.

President Eisenhower, looking back on the success of the American guides in Moscow in 1959, showed his enthusiasm for the human element in international relations:

If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments—if necessary to evade governments—to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other.³⁷

Though it remains unclear what else the American pavilion in Shanghai will contain, according to the official Expo 2010 website, the U.S. pavilion "...will showcase sustainability, teamwork, health, and struggle and achievements." Jose Villarreal, Commissioner General for the U.S. participation in Expo 2010, emphasizes that he is "committed to building an outstanding pavilion to showcase the best of the U.S." U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton avows that Expo 2010 will be "a perfect opportunity to highlight U.S. innovation, particularly in environmental initiatives, and to share ideas with countries from around the world on ways to create better cities and communities for all our people."³⁸

Wherever the venue, a sophisticated presentation of American arts and culture can continue to make inroads against negative perceptions of the U.S. "Freedom of speech on display" as an exhibition theme certainly works. And if foreign audiences can obtain an impression of America free of governmental filters, on their terms, they can better decide for themselves what America really is and what it represents to them.

Endnotes

- 1 The "kitchen debate" that would take place between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow was originally dubbed the "Sokolniki Summit" by *New York Times* columnist Harrison Salisbury. See William Safire, *Safire's Political Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 374.
- 2 Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: U.S. Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War*, Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008, p. 90.
- 3 Masey and Morgan, p. 90.
- 4 Winston Churchill, speaking at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, March 5, 1946.
- 5 Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ["Long Telegram"], February 22, 1946. Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsemy Papers.
- 6 The Voice of America radio broadcasts did, at this time, have an effect on listeners behind the Iron Curtain. For more on this subject, see Cull, Nicholas J., *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- 7 Nicholas J. Cull, p. 46.
- 8 As quoted in Cull, p. 102.
- 9 Carl Sandburg, *The Family of Man*, from the prologue of the exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, 1955, p. 2.
- 10 Cull, p. 118.
- 11 NSC 5607, "East-West Exchanges," National Security Council statement of policy, June 29, 1956; declassified and released under the Freedom of Information Act, December 24, 1984.
- 12 Walter Roberts, speaking at the July 23, 2009 conference, "From Face-off to Facebook: From the Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate to Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century," George Washington University, Washington D.C., July 23, 2009.
- 13 Masey and Morgan, p. 155.
- 14 Cull, from a response to author's July 29, 2009 blog, "Summer of 'Splitnik': Remembering the American National Exhibition in Moscow," http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/summer_of_splitnik_remembering_the_american_national_exhibition_in_moscow/.

- 15 Masey and Morgan, p. 242.
- 16 Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998, pp. 156–157.
- 17 Hans Tuch, speaking at the July 23, 2009 conference.
- 18 David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 35–36.
- 19 Masey and Morgan, p. 162.
- 20 Masey and Morgan, p. 179.
- 21 Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept*, New York: Knopf, 1993, p. 241.
- 22 David Caute, p. 49.
- 23 Cull, p. 211.
- 24 Sergei Khrushchev, speaking at the July 23, 2009 conference.
- 25 As quoted in Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 157.
- 26 Krenn, p. 168.
- 27 Tuch, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 28 Gottlieb, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 29 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: The White House Years*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965, p. 410.
- 30 Safire, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 31 Nina Gilden Seavey, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 32 William Safire, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 33 Marvin Kalb, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 34 Masey & Morgan, pp. 202–204 and the NYTimes article: "The Two Worlds: a Day-Long Debate: Nixon: 'I Am for Peace' Premier: 'Eliminate Bases' The Day-Long Debate Between Vice President Nixon and Premier Khrushchev VISITOR AND HOST EXCHANGE GIBES American Challenges Soviet Leader to Competition in Free Trade of Ideas." (1959, July 25). *New York Times (1857–Current file)*, p. 1.
- 35 Gottlieb, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 36 Clay Shirky, conference, July 23, 2009.
- 37 Eisenhower, p. 411.
- 38 <http://en.expo2010.cn/>.

Author Biography

Andrew Wulf is a PhD candidate in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom. His dissertation studies the genesis of exhibition culture in American foreign policy and addresses U.S. cultural exhibitions in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, from 1938 through 2003. He received his MA in Art History and Museum Studies at the University of Southern California in 2005.

Andrew began his museum career at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2002, and has since worked as an exhibitions curator at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, where he held a curatorial role on the blockbuster Einstein exhibition in 2004 and at USC's Fisher Museum of Art. In his current position as Curator of Exhibitions for the USC Libraries, he has curated over twenty cultural exhibitions that explore a wide range of human endeavor, including political subjects such as the Armenian Genocide, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the history of book burning. Papers given during 2009 include USC's Association of Public Diplomacy Scholars symposium, "Cultural Diplomacy: Clash or Conversation?", focused on the concept of American "degeneracy" in late 18th century Europe and how the United States used cultural exhibitions to counter jingoistic attitudes toward the young American republic, and "American Attempts at Cultural Diplomacy through International Exhibitions during the Reagan Presidency, 1981-1989" given at the Culture and International History IV Conference through the Universität zu Köln.

As a University Fellow at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, he has promoted collaboration and dialogue between museum and public diplomacy practitioners while investigating how civic and educative programming, like exhibitions, can serve people's lives more dynamically through cultural diplomacy models.

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