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The American National Exhibition and Kitchen Debates: How the World's Superpowers Portrayed the Events of the Summer of 1959 to Meet National Needs

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Abstract

An undergraduate research paper centered on the investigation of American and Soviet propaganda efforts during and immediately after the Kitchen Debate of 1959.

Keywords

Kitchen Debate, Nixon, Khrushchev

Disciplines

Cultural History | Diplomatic History | European History | History | International and Intercultural Communication | Social History | Social Influence and Political Communication | United States History

Comments

History Senior Thesis

This paper was written for the history senior seminar, *HIST 412: Eisenhower & His Times*, Spring 2015.

HISTORY SENIOR THESIS

The American National Exhibition and Kitchen Debates

How the World's Superpowers Portrayed the
Events of the Summer of 1959 To Meet National
Needs

Kevin Bardin
History 412

Vice President Richard Nixon bit his tongue following Soviet Premier Khrushchev's latest harangue about Nixon's previous line of work as a lawyer. The Russian leader had accused Nixon of being slick and dishonest, qualities in stark contrast to Khrushchev's background as a hardworking miner. Nixon reminded himself that he was playing host to Khrushchev, because although the pair was in Moscow, they were currently walking the aisles of the National American cultural exhibition, an exhibit that Nixon was ceremoniously opening. As the two strolled past a model American grocery store, in an attempt to change the subject, Nixon noted that his father had owned a small general store in California. Without pause Khrushchev retorted, "Oh, all shopkeepers are thieves." That insult was it for Nixon. He threw away his cordial attitude and fired back that even Soviet shopkeepers try to steal from their customers, as he had witnessed earlier that day. The tense exchange was followed by an impromptu debate between the two leaders that would become known as the 'Kitchen Debate.'¹

The discussion that occurred between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev on July 24, 1959 was one in a series of talks during Nixon's two week stay in the Soviet Union. What made the Kitchen Debate, or Sokolniki Summit as it was also known, special was that it happened in front of a large crowd of American and Soviet citizens. As the first half of the debate was taped by the Radio Corporation of America and the second was heavily reported upon by both Soviet and American journalists, both Nixon and Khrushchev naturally received a great deal of international attention.² The coverage of the debate centered on the two individuals and their spirited discussion. It was this intense focus on the emotion and unexpected nature of the Kitchen Debate that has driven the majority of research on the event up to present day. The American

¹ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1990), 255.

² "The Day Long Debate Between Vice President Nixon and Khrushchev" *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

media seized on the opportunity to identify the Vice President as the defender of American ideals, enhancing his prospects for the Republican Nomination for the Presidential election of 1960. The impact that the Kitchen Debate had on the Soviet people and the original intent of Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union were considered secondary issues. Few authors prioritized the answers to these questions, and thus failed to view the event through a multinational lens. This Soviet citizenry's perception of the event is essential to understanding the debate in its entirety, as they too were a part of the audience.

Instead of solely describing the Kitchen Debate as a launching point for Richard Nixon's presidential career, or framing the event in terms capitalism versus communism; this paper will incorporate both of these issues as points of context. But its focus will be an interpretation of the American and Soviet reactions to the Kitchen Debate and American National Exhibition as portrayed by each nation's media outlets. In order to dissect this broad topic, and provide the necessary context for the times, multiple questions will be answered. First, why was the United States allowed to hold an exhibition in Moscow? What were the United States' goals for the exhibit? Why was Nixon selected as the U.S. representative? Was the Kitchen Debate staged? What was discussed during the conversation? How did the United States react? How did the Soviet Union react? And why did the American press focus on the Kitchen Debate, while their Soviet counterparts concentrated on the entirety of the American cultural exhibit?

The Build-Up

The most momentous change in the Soviet-American landscape since the end of the Second World War came on March 5, 1953 with the death of Josef Stalin. Although Stalin's death did not bring about any immediate policy changes between the two super powers, it did offer the United States and President Eisenhower an opportunity to reset their relationship.

Eisenhower gave a speech that the President's Chief of Staff, Sherman Adams, would call "the greatest of his career." The speech was titled "The Chance For Peace" and was unexpectedly printed in the mainstream Soviet newspaper *Pravda* the following day. Unfortunately for the global community, Eisenhower's speech never gained momentum within the Soviet Union, as Communist Party leaders sorted out their nation's new leadership.³ Within days of Eisenhower's speech, much of the momentum for change seemed to be lost. The only assured change was the eventual promotion of a new Soviet Premier.

Following three years of internal struggle, an unlikely man emerged as the new leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev was a cunning politician of humble beginnings whose background is every bit as essential as Nixon's in understanding the outcome of the Kitchen Debate. Before surviving twenty years within Stalin's inner circle, Khrushchev labored in the coal mines of Donetsk, Ukraine.⁴ Khrushchev's national pride and wholehearted commitment to the Communist Party allowed him to rise to the highest position within a world superpower with relatively little bloodshed. Upon his arrival to power in 1956, Khrushchev was placed in a difficult situation, one in which he attempted to distance himself from brutal Stalinist policies while maintaining the power of his office.⁵

By 1956, it was clear that Khrushchev had established himself as the Soviet leader of the future. According to United States Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, who became close to Premier Khrushchev during his tenure as ambassador, Khrushchev was "conspicuously in the driver's seat" of the Soviet government after having exiled several of his rivals to remote government posts. Former Soviet leader Georgi Malenkov had been assigned to manage a

³ Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 65-66.

⁴ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), xi-xx.

⁵ Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Civil War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

hydroelectric plant in eastern Kazakhstan, while Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov had been posted in Outer Mongolia as an ambassador.⁶ Despite Premier Khrushchev's power grabbing efforts, the spirit of Stalinism continued to pervade certain Soviet foreign policy issues during the late 1950's. The division of Germany was one legacy that Khrushchev was unable to unilaterally solve.

In 1955 the four most powerful nations in the world met in Geneva, Switzerland to initiate a tentative thawing of the Cold War. The countries involved were the United States, the Soviet Union, France and Great Britain. The purpose was to facilitate peace talks, and while the topics of arms negotiations, trade barriers and nuclear warfare were all discussed, the conference was plagued by long-term stalemate. In an attempt to change the conversation Premier Khrushchev proposed a peace treaty on January 10, 1959 to be signed by the Soviet Union along with the three allied powers to arrange for the recognition of an independent East German government.⁷ The treaty served the interests of the Soviet Union dividing Germany as well as marking a clear border between communist and capitalist territory.⁸ In addition to the recognition of East Germany, the treaty called for the demilitarization of West Berlin which had been occupied and supported by American, French and British military forces since the conclusion of the war.⁹ By this time Premier Khrushchev was known for his brutal repression in Hungary and his affinity for brash proclamations. In this instance the Soviet leader threatened to sign a separate treaty with the German Democratic Republic which would have left the western powers to deal directly with the belligerent East German government.

⁶ David Allan Mayers, *The Ambassadors and America's Soviet Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 204.

⁷ Oleg Troyanovsky, "The Making of Soviet Foreign Policy," in *Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. By William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbot Gleason (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 219.

⁸ Although the division within Berlin had been informally declared following World War II, the allied powers had refused to recognize East Berlin as a separate government.

⁹ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man*, 396-400.

The 'peace' treaty was an attempt by Premier Khrushchev to gain global respect among the recognized leaders of the western world. In Ambassador Thompson's view, Khrushchev believed the western powers to be "rich and big and picking on [him]." Frustratingly for the Soviets, the treaty was unacceptable for the United States, France and Britain; all three had previously agreed that "an attack against one was an attack against all." Despite the positive sentiment of the Geneva conference, the United States' policy was clear: any Soviet effort to block access to Western Berlin would be treated as grounds for 'general war.' Khrushchev was playing a dangerous game with such ultimatums as the 'peace' treaty, but he felt it was necessary to gain an upper hand in East-West relations.¹⁰

By the spring of 1959 it had become clear that Khrushchev was anxious to seal the German treaty with the western powers. Years earlier, in a 1957 meeting with U.S. Senator Hubert Humphrey, Khrushchev had pleaded with the Senator for a quick response from the White House: "What are your president and secretary of state thinking? Where are their counterproposals?"¹¹ As 1958 ended, Khrushchev appeared to be without a foreign policy objective. He instead resorted to hurling pessimistic prophecies and threats toward the western world until they agreed to Soviet demands over West Berlin. But without counterpoints being offered by Khrushchev's opponents, all momentum was lost on the German peace issue.¹²

Similar to the German peace treaty, the Geneva conference which had opened in 1955 with such high aspirations was now in gridlock. By 1958 Eisenhower was determined to alter the political landscape. The president considered inviting Khrushchev or Soviet Presidium members to the United States for extended meetings; he even contemplated placing thousands of Soviet students in American universities as a means to improve American-Soviet relations. Much to

¹⁰ Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff*, 318-319.

¹¹ Oleg Troyanovsky, "The Making of Soviet Foreign Policy," 219.

¹² *Ibid.*, 220.

Eisenhower's chagrin, Secretary of State Foster Dulles rejected all these ideas as either illegal or too inefficient.¹³ Finally, in an attempt to loosen the tension between the two superpowers President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev agreed to a series of cultural exhibition exchanges to take place between the two countries. The exchange program had been adopted in the "spirit of Geneva" and by 1959 appeared to be one of the few positive outcomes from Geneva. In January of 1959, as Khrushchev was proposing his German "peace" treaty, the Soviet exhibit opened in New York City.¹⁴ The focus of the exhibition was Soviet industrial machinery and military prowess; Vice President Nixon described the scene as "heavy overtones of Soviet military might."¹⁵ Gilbert Robinson, who coordinated the American cultural exhibit in Moscow, recalled "the Soviet exhibit was a museum, it lacked any personal interaction."¹⁶ Although the Soviet Union's exhibit had been an impressive show of strength, it had not made a large impact on the American public's opinion of the communist country, a mistake the United States was sure not to duplicate.

Following the guidance of Los Angeles businessman Chad McClellan, the U.S. exhibit was to focus on consumer goods. McClellan's hope was that the exhibition would "dramatize the difference in the standards of living here [the United States] and in the Soviet Union."¹⁷ The cultural exhibit would feature products from countless American producers: cars from General Motors and Ford, a fully installed and functional kitchen from General Electric, a Pepsi-Cola soda fountain, 10ft. by 20 ft. projection screens, and the world's first color television studio by Ampex, all housed within a geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller.¹⁸

¹³ William Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 405.

¹⁴ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 237.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview* with author, March 31, 2015.

¹⁷ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 237.

¹⁸ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *Personal Interview*, March 31, 2015.

Once the materials had been selected the only remaining job was to choose the host of the exhibit. The idea of sending Nixon as the master of ceremonies originated with the Deputy Director of the United States Intelligence Agency, Abbott Washburn. Washburn had been working on the cultural exchange program, but his selection was contingent upon the approval of President Eisenhower.¹⁹ Despite what some of their contemporaries believed, the relationship between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Nixon was mutually respectful and constructive. According to Milton Eisenhower, the younger brother of President Eisenhower, “President Eisenhower, possibly telling no one but me, began grooming Nixon for the presidency, even at a time when the President was in the best of health.... His confidence in Nixon was unquestioned.”²⁰ To accompany Nixon, Eisenhower requested Milton’s services. Then the President of Pennsylvania State University, Milton would provide an intellectual’s view of the situation in the Soviet Union and also afford the Commander in Chief a pair of nonpolitical eyes.²¹ Although the brothers often used each other as sounding boards for ideas and issues, Milton’s professional career was untainted by politics. Milton Eisenhower had the president’s complete trust.

Preceding the American representatives’ arrival, two points of additional context must be considered in understanding the tension that immediately appeared between Vice President Nixon and Premier Khrushchev. The first is the Captive Nations Resolution, a proclamation passed by the U.S. Congress every year since 1950 which urged American citizens to study and show support for the plight of peoples living in Soviet dominated countries. This resolution did not call for any action on the part of the American people, but was mainly issued in support of

¹⁹ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 237.

²⁰ Milton Eisenhower, *The President is Calling* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1974), 325.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 326. President Dwight D. Eisenhower also sent his brother Milton as Vice-Chairman of the envoy to encourage a stronger relationship between Milton and Nixon. Dwight D. Eisenhower had absolute confidence in his Vice President in foreign affairs, while Milton lacked the same whole hearted opinion. By the end of the Soviet Union tour, Milton returned to the United States with a renewed respect for both Vice President Nixon and Mrs. Nixon. *Ibid.*, 325-327.

Eastern European descendants living in the United States. The 1959 version of the Captive Nations Resolution was passed just a week before Nixon's arrival in Moscow.²² The second contextual factor was Khrushchev's visit to the Soviet Union's satellite nation of Poland, which had ended only hours before American planes touched down. Premier Khrushchev had received an unexpectedly cold reception from the Polish people, embarrassing the Polish government and the Premier himself.²³ This disappointment, coupled with the American propaganda of the Captive Nations Resolution which strategically undermined the Soviet government's control in Eastern Europe had infuriated Khrushchev.

In his memoirs Richard Nixon describes the challenge that his excursion to the Soviet Union presented: "Russia was still shrouded in much of the sinister mystery of the Stalin era. The Iron Curtain was pulled tight across Europe, and Soviet missiles were feared."²⁴ In addition to confronting the capital of the Soviet Union, Nixon would also be tested by the polarizing figure of Premier Khrushchev. Again Nixon's memoirs offer a succinct passage of his thoughts on Khrushchev before the two met: "Few foreigners had been invited to meet Khrushchev.... Some visitors came away swearing that he was the devil incarnate; others swearing that he was just a drunk. All thought he was a bully."²⁵ Similarly, upon learning that Nixon would be opening the American culture exhibit, Khrushchev shared his thoughts on the man in his memoirs: "We considered him [Nixon] a man of reactionary views, a man hostile to the Soviet Union. In a word, he was a McCarthyite."²⁶ Obviously both sides harbored negative feelings toward the other, and with the strong personalities of these two world leaders about to meet, sparks would almost inevitably fly.

²² Richard Nixon, *Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 205.

²³ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁶ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 367.

On July 23, 1959 two American planes carrying members of the press along with American officials landed in Moscow. According to *New York Times* columnist James Reston, Nixon's arrival "had all the look of a propaganda invasion."²⁷ With just one year since the incident in Caracas, Venezuela Vice President Nixon was preparing to enter yet another potentially dangerous situation.²⁸

The Debate

The discussion of American and Soviet policies between Khrushchev and Nixon was not limited to the Kitchen Debate on July 24th, but spanned all of Nixon's stay from July 23rd to August 2nd.²⁹ The two leaders met constantly during the Vice President's time abroad: in the Kremlin the morning after the American convoy arrived, at the U.S. ambassador Llewellyn Thompson's home the following evening, at Khrushchev's *dacha* the next day and again before Nixon left the country. Their topics of conversation ranged from mutually assured destruction to speed boats, with Khrushchev largely dictating the tone of the talks. The Soviet leader's mercurial attitude became apparent to Nixon immediately, and it was up to the Vice President to adapt his way of speaking as to not be bullied by Khrushchev.³⁰

The two leaders were introduced and sat down to what Nixon called "a purely protocol courtesy visit;" Nixon would quickly learn otherwise. As Khrushchev ushered photographers out of his office, he sprang at the Vice President. The Premier launched into a polemic debate about the American Captive Nations Resolution: "In a long harangue, speaking in a high-pitched voice and frequently pounding the table, Khrushchev declared that the Soviet Government regarded the

²⁷ James Reston, "Khrushchev-Nixon Dialogue Proves Unusual Act on Diplomatic Stage," in *New York Times*, July 24, 1959.

²⁸ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 183-234.

²⁹ William Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 415.

³⁰ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 251.

resolution as a very serious “provocation.”³¹ Following months of preparation, Nixon was aware that the Soviets might attempt to use the resolution as a point of debate, but he was confident that Khrushchev was not genuine in his criticism. Nixon recalls “I was sure that he was going through an act—that he was using the resolution as a pretext for taking the offensive against me” and without the resolution “he would have found some other excuse for doing so.”³² These were the circumstances of the leaders’ first encounter, inadvertently setting the stage for their later debate.

In the afternoon of July 24th, Vice President Nixon along with Milton Eisenhower and a small contingent of the American entourage arrived at the site of the American cultural exhibition in Sokolniki Park. Nixon was there to officially open the exhibit, which would start admitting full sized crowds the next day. Unexpectedly, Khrushchev arrived at the exhibit shortly after Nixon. In his own words Khrushchev refers to his decision in his memoirs: “Our official representative who attended the opening informed about what the Americans had come up with, but I decided to go have a look for myself.... No formal decision was required for me to visit the exhibition; so I simply showed up.”³³

What Khrushchev saw, and what thousands of Soviet citizens would later see, was a marvel of American propaganda. Gilbert Robinson, who coordinated the exhibit said, “We built a ten-acre site, trying to reproduce for the Soviets what we had in America.” Robinson’s goal, which emulated President Eisenhower’s policy of winning hearts and minds, was to show the difference between average Soviet and American lives.³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 364.

³⁴ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview*, March 31, 2015.

According to Robinson, “Khrushchev had a habit of just showing up without telling anyone he was coming,” so when the Soviet Premier did exactly that, Robinson arranged for Khrushchev and Nixon to stand in the color studio. “We knew that the cameras would be focused on the studio, so I thought it would be interesting for Khrushchev to see the world’s first color television studio. I myself hadn’t ever seen one before, no one had.”³⁵ After being asked to offer a couple of greetings that would be recorded and played back to the exhibition’s guests, Khrushchev suddenly became inspired. “He saw a large crowd of Soviet workmen in the gallery overhead, and the corps of newspapermen around us, and the temptation was too much for him.” Khrushchev took the opportunity to boast of the Soviet Union’s global superiority.³⁶

The debate that followed lasted less than fifteen minutes, but every moment was recorded by Ampex’s new color television camera. By many accounts, Khrushchev was a leader who savored public attention. Milton Eisenhower said “Khrushchev, unlike his predecessor, craved above all else the applause of his own people.”³⁷ Khrushchev did not disappoint. With theatrical gestures, and exaggerated emotions he told Nixon that within seven years the Soviet Union would surpass the United States’ economy. Khrushchev, in a patronizing tone, said “and when we pass you, then, if you wish, we can stop and say: ‘Please follow up.’”³⁸ The two leaders also discussed the differences between the two nations in domestic housing. Khrushchev, who had recently advocated for the construction of new massive apartment complexes, was proud of Soviet living conditions.³⁹ “We build firmly. We build for our children and grand-children,” Khrushchev snapped after accusing capitalist builders of only constructing houses to last for one

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 253-254.

³⁷ Milton Eisenhower, *The President Is Calling*, 327.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview*.

generation.⁴⁰ The exchange concluded with Nixon trying to explain the new color television technology saying “after all, you do not know everything.” Khrushchev, eager to get the last word answered “If I don’t know everything, you don’t know anything about Communism except to fear it.”⁴¹ The pair then exited the stage and continued to wander through the exhibit.

The recording of the studio discussion was quickly dispersed by The Radio Corporation of America to media outlets in both the Soviet Union and United States. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and American Broadcasting Company (ABC) played the video in the days following the debate.⁴²

As Khrushchev and Nixon explored the exhibit, Khrushchev criticized different displays. The modern art was especially displeasing to him. “I found them revolting. Some of them [modernist paintings and sculptures] were downright perverted.”⁴³ Gilbert Robinson recalls hearing Khrushchev describe one of the paintings as “a pool of urine that a little boy might make by accident.”⁴⁴ Despite the Premier’s opinion of the art, he continued to talk with Nixon and take photos. In one of the more ironic twists of the afternoon, Khrushchev sampled Pepsi-Cola. Cola had long been an image that Soviet propaganda had associated with over indulgent Americans, but Harrison Salisbury, one of the few American journalists at the event, reported that Khrushchev and members of his ministry indulged in three glasses of Cola apiece.⁴⁵ This type of curiosity about U.S. goods was exactly what the American exhibit hoped to inspire.⁴⁶ Shortly after, Nixon and Khrushchev came upon one of the main pieces of the exhibition. The United

⁴⁰ “The Day Long Debate Between Vice President Nixon and Khrushchev” in *New York Times* (July 26, 1959).

⁴¹ Milton Eisenhower, *The President Is Calling*, 328.

⁴² “The Day Long Debate Between Vice President Nixon and Khrushchev”, *New York Times* (July 27, 1959).

⁴³ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 365.

⁴⁴ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview*.

⁴⁵ Harrison Salisbury, “Cola Captivates Soviet Leaders,” in *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

⁴⁶ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson commented on the effectiveness of the Pepsi-Cola exhibit. He recalled that the Vice President of Pepsi returned to the Soviet Union following the American exhibition and was able to negotiate a fifteen year contract with the Soviet government. This was the first such contract for any cola beverages, which had been taboo prior to that point. Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *Personal Interview*.

States workers had built a multi-level American home, and divided it in half so that guests could view each room from the pathway. Khrushchev and Nixon decided to stop at the kitchen display, which would be the site of the second half of their impromptu debates.

In contrast to both the discussion earlier that morning in Khrushchev's office and in the television studio, Nixon confessed that at this time he decided to stop fighting with one hand tied behind his back. With the earlier "debate" having been recorded, Nixon knew that he could not continue to appear to be dealing with Khrushchev from a position of weakness. President Eisenhower, along with the American people would not tolerate an American leader to be 'soft' on Communism; fully conscious of this point, Nixon took off his gloves. As Khrushchev inspected the kitchen appliances he was quick to criticize the wastefulness of American life. Nixon countered by applauding the American free market system and its competitiveness, which offered the American people the privilege of choice. Switching back and forth discussing washing machines and long range rockets, the leaders argued their country's merits for a half hour. In his memoirs, Nixon later wrote that near the end of the debate he made clear the point he had been driving at the entire time: "the United States, the world's largest capitalist country, has from the standpoint of distribution of wealth come closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society."⁴⁷ This statement, although idealizing the United States, was certainly effective in taking the initiative from Khrushchev. Following a toast to Premier Khrushchev's health, Nixon escorted Khrushchev to his limousine and bid him adieu for the evening.⁴⁸

Neither Nixon nor Khrushchev walked away from the Kitchen Debate with their opinions on capitalism or communism changed. Both were steadfast in their systems and too high in their respective governments to appear shaken, but persuading the other had never been the goal.

⁴⁷ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 255-260.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

Again, the focus of the American exhibit and Kitchen Debate itself was to intrigue Soviet citizens and perhaps change their preconceptions of American life.

Soviet Media and Propaganda

Wars can be fought and won in a variety of ways and in the mind of President Dwight D. Eisenhower the use of propaganda was an effective weapon in waging the Cold War. The Soviets were propaganda experts as well. It was obvious to both sides that the other would deliberately spread information and ideas to both aid themselves and undermine the enemy. The American cultural exhibition itself was an elaborate form of propaganda, intended to improve the average Soviet citizen's view of the United States. It was the responsibility of the Soviet government and media to minimize the exhibition's influence.

The interplay between the Soviet government and the Soviet news media can be explained by the book *Four Theories of the Press* in which the Soviet Communist theory is included. In the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin declared that the establishment of a daily political organ was essential for the consolidation of a political party. It was his view that such a paper would be “the collective propagandist, agitator and organizer of the movement.” In this spirit the news media of the Eastern bloc were to be “tools of the Communist Party in mobilizing support, delivering ideology to the masses, and essentially serve as propaganda instruments of the government.” The methods the government used to control the press included “censorship, as well as managing personnel and the equipment needed for production of newspapers.”⁴⁹ All of these strategies were in use in 1959 in an effort to limit the impact of the American cultural exhibit.

Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Head of the ministry of cultural affairs Georgi A. Zhukov served as the leaders of the Soviet Communist Party's (CPSU) counterattack to the

⁴⁹ Jim Willis, *Daily Life Behind the Iron Curtain* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 2013), 151-152.

American culture exhibit. Their main strategy in sabotaging the exhibit would be to depict it as inaccurate and blatant propaganda. In addition the CPSU would dramatically increase domestic promotion of recent Soviet technological achievements. As early as the spring of 1959 Gromyko and Zhukov were armed with a CPSU Central Committee report which included details of what the exhibit would display.⁵⁰ With this knowledge of domestic appliances, how American housewives prepare dinner, and color television the CPSU went to work.⁵¹

The Soviet counterpropaganda campaign “emphasized the weaknesses of capitalist society: the “multi-million army of unemployed,” millions living below the poverty line, indebtedness,” as well as “chronic stagnation, increasing bankruptcies of the farmers, and the lack of rights for ethnic minorities, especially negroes.”⁵² To ensure that these criticisms reached all Soviet peoples, the CPSU organized meetings with the Komsomol (Communist youth organization) to discuss “measures which could distract young people from displaying too much interest in the American exhibition.”⁵³

To promote Soviet life, the CPSU launched a collaboration of multiple government ministries to organize “festivals, exhibitions, public festivities, carnivals and amateur art shows” all to take place immediately before or during the American exhibition. The Society for the Propagation of Political and Scientific Knowledge, a Soviet lecture society, arranged for 10,000 lectures from Soviet research institutes and think tanks “to anchor the propaganda counteroffensive against the exhibition.” The CPSU also called for an increase in visual propaganda “including billboards, sides of buses, and posters in parks, gardens and public

⁵⁰ “On the Progress of Preparation for the Opening of the Soviet Exhibition in New York and of the American Exhibition in Moscow”, Report to the Central Committee of the CPSU, May 23, 1959, quoted in Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 186-189.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 185-186.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

places.” Finally, in an attempt to copy the Circarama display that would allegedly be submitted to the American exhibit by Disney, Soviets built a copycat and placed it in Moscow.⁵⁴

In addition to these official efforts recorded by the CPSU,⁵⁵ the Soviet government and media took additional pains to roadblock American success.

Despite having the official support of the Soviet government, the American exhibit in Moscow inevitably ran in to issues in the months leading up to the event. While the Soviet exhibit had been held in New York City’s Coliseum in Midtown Manhattan, the Soviet government offered Americans less than comparable venues. Chad McClellan rejected the offer of Gorkii Park along with two other sites proposed by the Soviets because of their insufficient space or physical structures to house the exhibit. “They first tried to put us over in left field, and then in right field, and then over the back fence,” recalled McClellan. By manipulating the location of the exhibition, the Soviet Union hoped to contain its exposure. Eventually Sokolniki Park was chosen because it was within a fifteen minute metro ride from Moscow’s center.⁵⁶

Preceding Vice President Nixon’s arrival in Moscow on July 23rd, the Soviet propaganda machine had already made an effort to downplay the westerner’s arrival. Only the largest papers had made any mention of the American exhibit and even those stories which had been published emphasized only the negative.⁵⁷ The Soviet Union’s largest paper, *Pravda*, meaning ‘the truth’ in Russian, published multiple stories after it had been granted early access to the exhibit in Sokolniki Park. On April 10, under the headline “Is This Typical?” the paper asserted that the American exhibition “would feature homes, cars, appliances, and conveniences in an attempt to

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵⁵ “Decree of the CPSU, ‘On Countermeasures in Connection with the Forthcoming United States National Exhibition in Moscow’”, Central Committee [undated], Center for the Storage of Contemporary Documents, Moscow), quoted in Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 186-189.

⁵⁶ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 162-163.

⁵⁷ “Soviet Campaign Disparages U.S.,” in *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

convey the false impression that such items could be possessed by the typical American consumer.”⁵⁸ In a second article which was reprinted in the *New York Times* under the title “Pravda Reports Flaws in the U.S. Fair” Soviet journalists again accused American designers of exaggerating the prosperity of average American homes. Similar to Khrushchev’s complaints of the exhibit, *Pravda* also critiqued the lack of heavy American industry and technology on display.⁵⁹

In another example of the Soviet press’s tendency to capture only the most negative aspects of the United States, shortly after Vice President Nixon’s arrival a story was circulated accusing him of bribing Soviet citizens. During Nixon’s first morning in Moscow he had spoken with many Soviets in a large marketplace, and upon learning that they had been unable to procure tickets for the American exhibit, Nixon offered to pay their price of admission. In reality, the issue was not the price of the tickets, but that the Soviet government had only distributed tickets to faithful members of the Communist Party. Before Nixon could get a clear translation of the problem, he had already handed money to one man. Immediately upon realizing his mistake Nixon apologized and the incident seemed like a simple misunderstanding; of course, Soviet propaganda pounced. “Suddenly, by radio, television, and questions by goons at every stop, it was charged that the Vice-President had tried to bribe Soviet workers!”⁶⁰

In addition to control over the press, the Soviet Union utilized its power of censorship. Leading up to the exhibition the Soviet government had pledged ‘zero censorship’ of any documents concerning the exhibit, but broke this pledge censoring different dispatches between international officials who had visited the fair.⁶¹ Soviet inspectors also banned a number of

⁵⁸ “Is This Typical?,” *Pravda*, April 10, 1959.

⁵⁹ Max Frankel, “Pravda Reports Flaws in the U.S. Fair,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

⁶⁰ Milton Eisenhower, *The President Is Calling*, 331.

⁶¹ “New Tactics in Soviet Press Reports and a New Censorship Ban,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

materials that had been planned to be included in the American exhibit, including a long list of contemporary and classic literature. Among the censored volumes was John K. Galbraith's *Journey to Poland and Yugoslavia: 1958*, a book which offered a westerner's first-hand account of life in the Soviet dominated bloc. The Bible was also regarded as dangerous to atheistic Soviet propaganda agents and could only be displayed as part of a bookshelf, not as an individual book.⁶²

The Communist Party also negated Chad McClellan's hopes of handing out free cosmetic samples and model car to Soviet visitors. As a result, Coty Cosmetics was forced to withdraw "\$150,000 worth of free samples as well as nine Russian-speaking American women who had been hired to hand out the make-up." Soviet officials cited the policy as necessary to prevent dangerously large crowds of people waiting to receive samples, but in truth wanted to avoid direct comparisons of Soviet and American cosmetic products.⁶³

Upon Vice President Nixon's arrival to Moscow the CPSU was forced to supplement many of its official strategies with more creative means to limit American influence. While Nixon walked the aisles of the exhibit, it was common for Soviet citizens to ask him questions about his opinion of the displays. These curious individuals quickly became dominated by hecklers who the Soviet government had paid to ask Nixon difficult or uncomfortable questions. These paid provocateurs were described by Milton Eisenhower as "adroit in making their charges in loud voices that all could hear and then in preventing the people from hearing Nixon's response." Their strategy appeared to be to ask Nixon about the 'bribery' incident in the

⁶² Roscoe Drummond, "Khrushchev Words Vs the Truth," *Yuma Daily Sun*, July 30, 1959, obtained from www.newspaperarchive.com.

⁶³ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 189.

marketplace, and before he could answer, harangue about the Captive Nations Resolution.⁶⁴

While crude, this method did serve to undermine the Vice President's authority.

There was little hope for the CPSU to accurately gauge how well it had prepared the capital city for the coming onslaught of American propaganda. Only once the exhibition gates opened, would the Soviet government realize how unprepared it was to curb the excitement brought on by the exhibit.

Soviet Reactions

In retelling an incident that occurred during the exhibit, Gilbert Robinson describes the impact that the cultural exchange had on many Muscovites.

One day a KGB agent who helped with security at the exhibit came running up to me, screaming and pointing at my I.D. badge. Through my interpreter I came to realize that he was terrified by the crowd waiting to enter the geodesic dome, because the Russian citizens weren't respecting his authority. As a KGB agent he had never had that issue, but inside the exhibit the Russians felt as though they were in the United States. So, I turned to him, handed him my badge which had an American flag on it and told him "Today you're an American."⁶⁵

Obviously this account of the exhibition cannot be applied to all who visited, but it still relates to the experiences of many. Soviet citizens visited Sokolniki park en mass during the summer of 1959 and while not all left with a positive view of the United States, their participation in the exchange program ensured its success. During preparations for his trip to the Soviet Union, Vice President Nixon had described his job as convincing "the 200 million people of Russia who are not Communists" that the United States was genuine in its desire for friendly relations with Russia.⁶⁶ The consumer goods displays of the American exhibit certainly offered a non-threatening view of American society that Russians could appreciate. But in addition, the

⁶⁴ Milton Eisenhower, *The President is Calling*, 332.

⁶⁵ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview with author*, March 31, 2015.

⁶⁶ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 245.

exhibit offered a sort of “tourism in reverse” that made it possible for thousands of Russians to visit the United States without ever leaving their country.⁶⁷

The reactions of Soviet citizens to the American exhibit are well documented, ranging from amazement to disgust. To best capture the honest opinions of Russian visitors, the exhibit offered blank books located throughout the displays in which visitors could record their thoughts. Russians also made their opinions known through notes they passed to American officials and Russian speaking guides. Some guides received messages gushing with admiration for the United States: “If the exhibition represents the American way of life, then it is the American way of life we should overtake.”⁶⁸ “About the exhibition, one can say in short: Brilliant, deep, exciting.”⁶⁹ Naturally, negative opinions were also to be found amongst visitors.

Premier Khrushchev himself did not remember the exhibit fondly in his memoirs: “The exhibition wasn’t very successful. The organizers were obviously not serious about displaying American life and culture; they were more interested in drumming up a lot of propaganda.”⁷⁰ Realistically, Khrushchev was correct, the Americans’ goal was to impress upon the Soviet people a sense that “diversity, the right to choose...That’s the spice of life.”⁷¹ The Soviet leader was also not alone in his critical opinion of the American art exhibit. One fellow Soviet visitor wrote: “It really was not worthwhile to bring your ‘sculptures’ to Moscow. They cause laughter and puzzle the spectators. Your automobiles are excellent. It is hard to understand how a country which builds such automobiles can show such ‘art.’”⁷² The modernist selections that a panel of four American art experts had chosen for the exhibit were in stark contrast to the contemporary

⁶⁷ Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: US Exhibits and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 2008), 211.

⁶⁸ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 196.

⁶⁹ Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 265.

⁷⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 364.

⁷¹ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 256.

⁷² Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 258.

realist styles of the Soviet Union. However, one satirical painting by Jack Levine, “Welcome Home,” drew the praise of the *Daily Worker*⁷³ for its depiction of a gluttonous U.S. Army General surrounded by his wealthy friends at a banquet table.⁷⁴ Indeed, the Soviet press rarely missed the opportunity to ridicule capitalist over indulgence.

One portion of the exhibit that seemed immune to ridicule was the group of seventy-five Russian speaking Americans who served as guides throughout the exhibit. The group included twenty-seven women and forty-eight men, four of whom were African-American. All of the guides were young American citizens, fluent in Russian, and essential to influencing the Soviets’ perceptions of American life. Coordinator Gilbert Robinson recalls, “the guides became the most important things in the exhibit. Some were African-Americans, helping break down racial stereotypes. The Soviet citizens talking to the guides became an essential tool for us, they were more important than the physical exhibits.”⁷⁵

Well trained before the exhibition, American guides were briefed on how to handle difficult questions they might receive from Russian visitors concerning race relations in the American South, or unemployment. While CPSU agitators attempted to fluster guides with those very questions, it quickly became evident that the Americans were well prepared to act as ambassadors for the United States. Many of the guides were children of Russian émigré families, and in the eyes of the visitors “embodied the American dream.”⁷⁶

The personal interactions between Soviet visitors and American guides came to have the most profound impact on preconceptions. Tania Akhonin, a twenty-two year old guide, helped disprove the image of American life that was largely “based on 1930 depression concepts.”

⁷³ The *Daily Worker* was a popular Soviet magazine controlled by the Communist Party.

⁷⁴ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 173.

⁷⁵ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview*, March 31, 2015.

⁷⁶ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 193- 195.

Admittedly, the African-American guides were forced to be honest in their interpretation of civil rights in the United States and the discrimination that exists. But this honesty was reciprocated with trust and similar honesty from Soviet visitors. These feelings were made apparent by the visitors' willingness to share not only secret notes with guides, but letters to be passed along to family members living in the west.

The majority of Soviet visitors' reactions toward the exhibition were positive. Countless quotes were preserved from the books placed throughout the exhibit such as this from a Soviet man: "Best of all I liked the conversation with the American lads. We had a straightforward, frank talk. It seems to me that such contacts, such meetings are very useful."⁷⁷ What were less well documented were the opinions of Soviet citizens' opinions regarding the Kitchen Debate.

The recording of the first portion of the debate between Premier Khrushchev and Vice President Nixon was broadcast on Soviet television networks in the days following July 24th. The amount of attention the event received from the Soviet media was negligible compared to the circus surrounding the exhibition, a circumstance that can be attributed to three causes. First, the debate had been completely unrehearsed and unforeseen. The CPSU's propaganda counteroffensive had not been originally designed to promote Khrushchev's talking points in a debate that had centered on rockets and washing machines. This meant that once the Communist Party did design a rebuttal, it was poorly organized and after the debate had been internationally aired.

The second cause was the over embellishment in CPSU officials' reports, which indicated that the efforts of Communist Party agitators had been highly effective in discrediting both American displays and guides.⁷⁸ Believing that the hecklers had successfully duped

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

Americans with their accusations concerning the Captive Nations Resolution and over exaggeration of American wealth, which were some of Khrushchev's main talking points during the Kitchen Debate, the CPSU considered the debate less important than the exhibit itself. The CPSU's propaganda machine moved on to focus on its criticisms of the exhibition.

Lastly, and most importantly, it was Khrushchev's wish that the Soviet people would be inspired by the American displays of consumer products. This is not to say that the leader of the Soviet Union hoped his citizenry would proclaim their love of capitalism, but that they would see the potential in a society driven by consumer products. Khrushchev wanted to improve the standard of living in the Soviet Union, and one of his strategies was to decrease the military budget while placing more emphasis on consumer products. Although Soviet military leaders would be slow to adopt any such policies, Khrushchev believed that if enough Communist Party members began to demand what they saw in the American exhibition, the government would be forced to shift its focus. According to Robinson, this deduction of Khrushchev's intentions had been the work of Ambassador Thompson, and confirmed during a debriefing meeting with Soviet officials following the end of the exhibit.⁷⁹ With this ulterior motive in mind Khrushchev was sure to keep the media's emphasis on the American exhibition, without appearing to support it outright.

American Media and Propaganda

Time magazine described the day following Vice President Nixon's landing in Moscow as "peacetime diplomacy's most amazing 24 hours."⁸⁰ Within that span the two world leaders would meet one another, officially open the American culture exhibit, record an impromptu debate that millions would see and then debate again. These meetings between Khrushchev and

⁷⁹ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview*, March 31, 2015.

⁸⁰ "Better to See Once," *Time Magazine*, Aug. 3, 1959, 11-16, Quoted in Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 178.

Nixon were the centerpiece of the foreign relations tour and had delivered more than expected. The Kitchen Debate became an instant obsession in the American media with Nixon playing the part of the hero and Khrushchev the villain. But for *Time* to only highlight one 24 hour period was insufficient as American efforts at peacetime diplomacy and propaganda began well before July 24th.

The United States' desire to win the 'hearts and minds' of Soviet citizens was a non-stop initiative. One weapon employed by the United States was radio. Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts penetrated the USSR, offering news of literary, artistic, and scientific developments in the western world. Radio Free Europe (RFE), officially considered a privately owned station but suspected by the Soviet Union to be operated by the U.S. government, also gave broadcasts in Russian. RFE as well as Radio Liberation (RL) were frequently jammed by the Soviet government, as it was less tolerant of broadcasts in the Russian language. Additionally, the United States Information Agency published *Amerika*, a magazine that achieved popularity in the Soviet Union. Considering the attention that western radio and magazines drew in the Soviet Union, many U.S. officials recognized that the culture exhibition in Moscow "represented a unique opportunity to have a direct impact on the Soviet masses."⁸¹

President Eisenhower himself recognized the importance of the event, and used his influence to secure many of the donated products that would be used in the exhibition. During a White House luncheon in early 1959 the president along with McClellan launched a fundraising effort that would result in 'patriotic' donations from RCA, General Mills, General Foods, Grand Union, Pepsi-Cola, Dixie Cup Co., IBM, Sears, Whirlpool, and Kodak among others.

In the months leading up to the July 24th debut, the Sokolniki Park construction site underwent sweeping changes. The construction project, headed by American architect George

⁸¹ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 114-115.

Nelson, needed to not only be designed and built within seven months, but also have its contents selected and shipped. In Nelson's own words: "The stakes are high, the budget low, the deadline impossible. We feel in this case how good our design is isn't important. Primarily, we want to make a simple sincere statement about American life."⁸²

Following months of work and international cooperation, the concrete was poured just hours before Nixon and Khrushchev would arrive to make their opening remarks. What would essentially be a six-week long propaganda presentation was ready to begin. And while not all the displays inspired visitors, the success of the exhibition as a whole was undeniable. The site averaged 64,000 visitors each day, amounting to a total of 2.7 million. McClellan claimed the actual number of attendees exceeded 2.7 million because so many Russians climbed fences and entered without tickets.⁸³ In their excitement guests claimed any souvenirs they could carry on their way out of the exhibition. The book displays were constantly pilfered by visitors, as were the stacks of Levi jeans. Of course, this had been the hope of American suppliers; armed with thousands of replacements, Americans restocked the shelves obviously wanting as many U.S. products to infiltrate Soviet lives as possible.⁸⁴ While this thievery contradicted the Communist Party's claims of having a well behaved citizenry, Americans knew the products would perpetuate the message of consumer comfort well after the exhibition closed.

American newspapers shared the success of both the Kitchen Debate and culture exhibit in the states. In his assessment of Nixon's performance, journalist James Reston praised the Vice President for his "modification of personal assumptions on both sides" and commented that the

⁸² George Nelson, *New York Herald Tribune*, March 11, 1959, Quoted in Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 240.

⁸³ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 201.

⁸⁴ Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 211.

debate provided an “excellent political platform” for the ambitious Nixon.⁸⁵ Other articles made a point of demonizing Premier Khrushchev, comparing his luxurious country *dacha* to the drab living conditions of most Soviet citizens.⁸⁶ Soviet propaganda and censorship policies were also criticized the *New York Times*.

To its credit, the American media did appear to present a more balanced view of the exhibit and debate than its Soviet counterpart. Reporter Max Frankel included an opinion of one Russian visitor who said American bedsheets were “pretty, but terrible. It doesn’t show the dirt.” Other visitors expressed disappointment over the absence of technology and heavy industry. Frankel also observed that the Sokolniki exhibit lacked any displays of juvenile delinquency or high taxes, implying that Americans were whitewashing the social and economic landscapes.⁸⁷

More than half a century removed from the Kitchen Debate, there exist positive reviews of even Khrushchev’s performance against Nixon. Without the surrounding context of the Cold War, author and propaganda expert Kenneth Osgood described Khrushchev as “jovial and approachable” during his public appearances with Nixon. By not appearing as menacing, Khrushchev improved his international image and softened the Iron Curtain.⁸⁸ But this revisionist view is certainly at odds with the overwhelming media favoritism shown to Nixon in the immediate aftermath of the debate.

Two of the most powerful weapons of pro-Nixon propaganda coming out of the Kitchen Debate were the televised recording of his discussion with Khrushchev and a photo taken by Bill Safire from within the kitchen exhibit. The picture captured Nixon deep in conversation with

⁸⁵ James Reston, “Nixon Visit Assessed,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

⁸⁶ “Premier’s Dacha is a Luxury Home,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

⁸⁷ Max Frankel, “Pravda Reports Flaws in U.S. Fair,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1959.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 357.

Khrushchev, more than holding his own against the communist leader. These two forms of media helped to launch Richard Nixon's career toward the 1960 presidential race.

American Reactions

Following the broadcast of the first half of the Kitchen Debate on American television, the *New York Times* compiled opinions of American citizens from across the country. The sentiments collected were as varied as the cities from which they came and alternated between praise and criticism for Richard Nixon. Among the most positive were New Yorkers who said "He's doing very well, handling himself admirably" and one Chicago bus driver who said "He made me feel proud of him." Valentine Anselmo, a citizen of New Orleans, offered a keen foreign relations perspective, "Anything to soften up the tension between the two countries is good." Among the more negative Americans was a Bostonian who believed "Nixon didn't help us. He looked like an American tourist" and those in Minneapolis who had doubts that anything productive would ever come of the debate. Regardless of the opinion, the fact that Nixon had received such publicity was a boost to his political aspirations. Perhaps the most accurate thought collected came from San Francisco: "This is the best propaganda any politician running for office ever got."⁸⁹

The opinions collected by the *Times* were only based on Nixon's performance during the first portion of his public talks with Khrushchev. The second half was not recorded, which meant that those not present on July 24th relied on the mostly positive reviews written by American reporters. Even so, Gilbert Robinson who witnessed the Kitchen Debate first hand, said, "In the first debate I thought he [Nixon] was very calm....And then in the kitchen, I was really proud of

⁸⁹ Multiple Correspondents, "Moscow Debate Stirs United States Public," *New York Times*, July 28, 1959.

him. He made his case beautifully.”⁹⁰ Similarly, in his retelling of the debate, Milton Eisenhower says “I felt that Nixon had, on the whole, come off fairly well.”⁹¹ Nixon himself recalls one American businessman who was present telling him, “No matter what happens now, your trip to the Soviet Union will go down as a major diplomatic triumph.”⁹² These comments, indicative of most reviews of the Kitchen Debate, helped establish Richard Nixon as an American leader who would not back down to the Communist Party, a quality many American voters required in a president.

Other opinions that captured the atmosphere of the American exhibition were those of the American guides and workers who interacted with countless Soviet citizens. While the American media decided to focus on the growing popularity of Richard Nixon, the exhibit and its workers continued to influence Soviet minds and contradict years of CPSU propaganda. As a result of increased exposure to one another, not only did Russians learn about Americans, but the reverse process occurred as well. Sarah Carey who worked as a member of the Pepsi-Cola exhibit in 1959 recalls, “I had the usual surprise that I think everybody got in those days: that these people are a whole lot like us. They’re open. They’re generous. They talk pretty freely.”⁹³ John R. Beyrle, an eventual U.S. Ambassador to Russia, served as a guide in Sokolniki and remembers the great paradox of Russia: a country with rich culture and great people which were stifled by the Soviet system of “hypocrisy and lies.” Beyrle admits that while it’s impossible to quantify

⁹⁰ Ambassador Gilbert Robinson, *telephone interview*, March 31, 2015.

⁹¹ Milton Eisenhower, *The President is Calling*, 331.

⁹² Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, 261.

⁹³ Sarah Carey, *Personal Interview by Ian Kelly*, October 21, 2008, Washington, DC, Transcript obtained from United States Department of State.

the significance of personal interactions between Russians and Americans, he has no “doubt that it all had a significant impact.”⁹⁴

Realistically, this impact was too slow moving. In the United States, a society where short-term headlines outweigh long-term solutions, the effect of the culture exhibit was small. The news media needed a story that would produce sensation and instinctively turned to politics: the hero vs. villain narrative of Nixon and Khrushchev. Of course, the performance of Richard Nixon in the Kitchen Debate, and all of his meetings with Premier Khrushchev was worthy of nationwide attention. Additionally, Nixon’s timing was impeccable; the Republican Party was extremely vulnerable following the midterm elections of 1958 and in desperate need of a leader to succeed President Eisenhower.⁹⁵ Following his return to the United States, Nixon had earned Eisenhower’s complete trust and owned a resume that boasted the deft handling of communist forces in Caracas and Moscow. Nixon rode this momentum to the Republican Party ticket and nearly to the White House, losing a narrow race to John F. Kennedy.

Ultimately, it was the United States’ need for a heroic figure in the fight against communism that propelled Nixon’s popularity.

Conclusion

If asked to describe Nikita Khrushchev most westerners would recall a stocky Soviet man, with beady eyes who pounded his shoe at the United Nations. But in reality, Khrushchev was a dynamic leader, whose efforts to de-Stalinize the Soviet Union and improve western relations led to the cultural exchange program of the late 1950’s. This in turn allowed the United States and Soviet Union to begin a friendly dialogue amongst its citizens that resulted in the most relaxed relations since the end of the Second World War.

⁹⁴ John Beyrle, *Personal Interview by Ian Kelly*, October 1, 2008, Washington, DC, Transcript obtained from United States Department of State.

⁹⁵ Richard Nixon, *Memoirs*, 199-200.

The American exhibit in Moscow, much like its Soviet counterpart in New York City, succeeded in presenting the opposing country with a view of the nation's achievements. What the American exhibit did, that its Soviet counterpart had not, was demonstrate the benefits of freedoms in an average citizen's life. Through the medium of consumer goods, the American exhibition had "dramatized the difference" between the two superpowers.

The Communist Party's all-out counteroffensive against the Sokolniki Park exhibit was unable to quell the interest shown by millions of Soviets. Despite the censorship of American literature and a propaganda campaign of the Soviet Union's successes, the Russian people were determined to visit the exhibition. Through the countless personal interactions between visitors and guides, preconceived notions and assumptions were erased on both sides creating a mutual understanding of a need for peace.

But as is often the case in history, the actions of individual leaders overshadow the feelings of common citizens. The impromptu Kitchen Debate provided the opportunity for an unprecedented live discussion between Nixon and Khrushchev, each arguing the merits of their respective systems.

Although the Soviet and American media outlets reported on the same events from July 23rd to August 3rd, their focuses became increasingly different. CPSU media became concentrated on the displays of the American exhibition, often criticizing them for wastefulness, but continuing to remind Soviet citizens of what luxuries they could have. This media coverage of course was Khrushchev's strategy to lower defense spending and allow greater support of consumer goods. Meanwhile, American media became enamored with Richard Nixon's handling of Soviet leadership. The Republican Party's political landscape was in need of a rising star, and believed it had found one in the televised recording of the Kitchen Debate.

What can be learned from an analysis of both sides' media and propaganda strategies is that the American National exhibition was a success. Utilizing fascinating architecture, a wide variety of content and most importantly human interaction, the cultural exchange produced at least short-term improvements in Cold War relations.

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