

SOVIET AND EASTERN EUROPEAN REACTIONS TO AMERICAN  
EXHIBITIONS: CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND THE COLD WAR, 1961-1976

by

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## ABSTRACT

After the signing of the Cultural Exchange Agreement in 1958, exhibitions of culture and technology were exchanged between the Soviet Union and the United States. These exhibitions continued to be exchanged well into the 1980s. This paper focuses on comment books from seven of these cultural exchange exhibitions, five in the Soviet Union and two in Eastern Europe, in the years between 1961 and 1976. The public nature of the comment books and the way they were treated by visitors made them a space for expressions of popular opinions over the issues of public policy and ideology. As such, they provide contemporary historians with a unique glimpse into the mindset of ordinary Soviet and Eastern European citizens during the Cold War.

Based on the evidence from the comment books, and using methods elaborated by cultural anthropologists, this study shows that challenged by the display of apparent American superiority, most Soviet visitors preferred to fall back on the official ideology which claimed the moral superiority of their system. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Soviet citizens experienced an upswing in communist morale, expressed a desire to compete with America and a conviction that their system will ultimately prevail over capitalism. However, to what extent such declarations should be accepted at their face value as sincere expressions of Soviet citizens' deep-seated convictions and to what extent they should be seen as situational responses to the perceived humiliation at the hands of foreigners remains unclear.

While most Soviet visitors were defensive, invested in their ideology, and competitive with America, their reactions were not monolithic. Some of them were clearly fascinated by American consumer products and expressed an envious yearning to get possession of them;

others stressed their openness to cultural exchange. There were apparently sincere expressions of support to the policy of détente, and of outrage over the Vietnam War. The Soviet visitors were aware of the unrest in American society caused by the civil rights movement, but were uninformed of the profound changes effected by this movement. Members of non-Russian minorities were interested in American ethnic diversity and sometimes implied their dislike of Moscow treatment of non-Russian nationalities. Eastern Europeans were less defensive and more open to American society and culture than the Soviets. Still, some of them also expressed pro-communist sentiments and national pride. There was one issue, however, on which the Soviets and Eastern were clearly more in tune with American popular culture than with their own governments: consumerism and the sentiment of entitlement to the high quality goods that Americans had access to while they did not. It was on this issue that the eastern bloc regimes were facing the greatest threat.

I lovingly dedicate this thesis to my fiancé David, who has assisted and inspired me more than he will ever know.

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## INTRODUCTION

When President Dwight Eisenhower and Premier Nikita Khrushchev signed the Cultural Exchange Agreement in 1958 it was supposedly to further friendly exchange between the two world powers. Despite signing with ulterior motives, both leaders probably did not realize exactly how cultural exchange would be received in both countries, and the lasting impact it would have. The reactions of the Soviet Union and Eastern European citizens to the cultural exchange exhibitions are important to understanding how the Cold War shaped those societies and their cultures.

While defending their way of life, Soviet visitors to the cultural exchange exhibitions experienced an upswing in communist morale and a desire to compete with America. Competition, as shown in the comment books, contributed to a change in consumerism within the Soviet Union. These responses were created by the external and internal strains created by the exhibitions themselves.

### Historiography

The historiography of the cultural Cold War and the cultural exchange exhibitions is a relatively new and short one. Historians started out by defining what the cultural exchange was, and how it was connected to politics and the Cold War in general. In his first book on the topic, *U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958-1986: Who Wins?*, political scientist Yale Richmond provides an overview of what the United States exchanged with the Soviet Union. He claims that the Soviet Union viewed the cultural exchanges as a chance to gain access to United States

technology, and a chance for peaceful coexistence.<sup>1</sup> According to Richmond, the United States was more focused on using the exchange to “increase the Soviet bloc’s knowledge of the outer world so that their judgments are based on fact rather than ‘Communist fiction,’ to encourage freedom of thought, to stimulate the demand for greater personal security for bloc citizens, to encourage their desire for more consumer goods and to stimulate nationalism in an effort to encourage ‘defiance of Moscow.’”<sup>2</sup> Published in 1987, Richmond’s book suffers from his lack of access to the Soviet and Eastern European sources. As he put it, “One can only speculate, therefore, what prompted them to make a radical departure from past practice...”<sup>3</sup>

In his pioneering book, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961*, historian Walter Hixson concentrates on the American side of the Cultural Exchange Agreement. He argues that “Through a process of gradual cultural infiltration Americans could begin to export the symbols, lifestyles, consumerism, and core values of their society. By the end of the Eisenhower years, U.S. mass propaganda and cultural dissemination had begun to influence mass perceptions throughout the Soviet empire.”<sup>4</sup>

He argues that this dissemination was facilitated by the availability of new mass communication technology, which often allowed information to sometimes escape any government filters. While his book focuses primarily on the Eisenhower era prior to the 1960s, it provides valuable information on the political motives behind and importance of the cultural exchange. Unlike Richmond who simply describes the exchange, Hixson delves into the motives behind them and attempts to explain why the American government resorted to using culture to undermine communism.

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<sup>1</sup> Yale Richmond, *U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958-1986: Who Wins?* (Boulder: West view Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Richmond, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), xii.

Richard Pells' book, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*, also from 1997, provides an informative discussion of the European views of the Cold War cultural exchange. Pells sees an important connection between the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the State department, or a connection between culture and politics during the Cold War. According to Pells, "In setting up [the USIA], the Eisenhower administration reinforced and institutionalized the symbiotic relationship between American culture and American foreign policy, a relationship that was itself dependent on the Cold War."<sup>5</sup> He also claims that in the late 1950s, the Cold War began to be fought with greater subtlety as relentless and obvious propaganda became less popular with Americans and Europeans alike. Despite the difference in perspective (European versus American), Pells and Hixson share many of the same ideas about the use of culture as a weapon in the Cold War. In his second book on the topic of the cultural Cold War, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain*, political scientist Yale Richmond states that the United States failed to realize the true impact of their influence on Soviet society and culture because they were concerned with the might of the Soviet Union, military and other wise. "Official Washington...tended to downgrade the importance of the West's attractions during the Cold War, focusing instead on the Soviet Union's missiles and ground forces."<sup>6</sup> This idea differs from both Hixson and Pells, who believe that the United States was well aware of their effect on the Soviet Union, and even went out of their way to capitalize on it.

In recent years, historians have turned their attention to the cultural exchange exhibitions themselves, and have connected them to larger political themes. The evidence that these

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Pells, *Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 84.

<sup>6</sup> Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange & The Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

historians use relate specifically to the exhibits such as pictures, comment books, and guide reports. While many previous historians, such as Hixson, have concentrated on the Eisenhower period, historians in the new millennium tend to focus on the 1960s and later. This specific evidence and later time period have allowed these current historians to continue the history of the cultural Cold War.

In their book from 2008, *Cold War Confrontations: U.S. Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War*, Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan examine cultural exhibitions staged by the United States Information Agency worldwide. They claim that the exhibitions are a major part of the cultural Cold War, and concentrate on those exhibitions that feature a confrontation between East and West. This book is similar to Richmond's first book, with a global focus that is not limited to the Soviet Union. The book is primarily pictorial, unfortunately not containing a large amount of analysis. However, it does provide important background on the cultural exchange in a global context.

In her 2008 article, "Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959", Susan Reid uses the comment books and guide reports from American National Exhibition to conclude that the exhibition reinforced the perceptions of the benefits of communism for the Soviet people, rather than disrupted it. Reid disagrees with Hixson, and finds his ideas to be hasty and contradictory with his judgment that the Soviet visitors were overly impressed.<sup>7</sup>

A reassessment of the sources indicates that the exhibition's effects were not simply, as the U.S. planners and sponsors expected and as some of the contemporary U.S. press claimed, to discredit the communist project and trigger a stampede of frustrated would-be consumers, but more ambivalent. In that response, the advantages of a system that promised social security, services,

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Reid, "Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9 no. 4 (2008): 858.

housing, and free education and health care still represented important sources of identification and patriotic pride.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in an article from 2010, “Cold War ‘Bridge-Building’: U.S. Exchange Exhibits and Their Reception in the Soviet Union, 1959-1967,” Tomas Tolvaisas examines several of the exhibitions in the early 1960s and claims that the exhibitions promoted good will towards and understanding of the U.S. among Soviet and Eastern European citizens. He finds that the Russian speaking guides were primarily responsible for these feelings, as the public face of the exhibitions. Tolvaisas, finding Reid’s analysis too “cautious”, applies many of Hixson’s ideas to the exhibitions of the 1960s. However, unlike Hixson, Tolvaisas does not fully connect the exhibitions to the fall of the Soviet Union, but rather concentrates on the actions of the guides.<sup>9</sup> This historiography is very recent, and this topic is acknowledged as a new and growing field. As historians have only recently begun to move away from the American National Exhibition, there are thirty more years of exhibitions and cultural exchange left to explore.

Similar to Hixson, this study will argue that the cultural exchange exhibitions influenced various changes in the Soviet Union. However, like Reid, it also acknowledges that the exhibitions were not always enough to lead Soviet citizens to abandon their political system and way of life. Primarily, this study will extend the current literature on the cultural exchange exhibitions past the American National Exhibition, focusing on the previously unexplored exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s. It will also provide important perspective on the effects of cultural exchange during the Cold War.

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9 no. 4 (2008):858.

<sup>9</sup> Tomas Tolvaisas, “Cold War ‘Bridge Building’: U.S. Exchange Exhibits and Their Reception in the Soviet Union, 1959-1967.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 4 (2010): 4.

## Primary Sources

The primary evidence in this study comes from comment books from various cultural exchange exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s. In order to understand the contents of the comment books, it is important to understand what the exhibitions contained, and when and where they were staged. Understanding the American motives behind the implementation of the exhibitions, as well as why they were allowed in the Soviet Union sheds light on how the exhibitions might have been perceived by visitors.

The first American exhibition in the Soviet Union was the American National Exhibition (ANEM) in 1959. Set in Moscow's Sokolniki Park, visitors to ANEM could view a model average American home, see blue jeans being made, and sample Coca-Cola and frozen food, among other displays and activities.<sup>10</sup> The exhibitions in the 1960s and 1970s became more specific, featuring one aspect of technology or society, such as plastics, photography, or transportation. The "Plastics U.S.A" exhibition in Kiev in 1961 contained, among other items, packaging displays, toys, and a plastic sports car and speed boat.<sup>11</sup> The "Transportation U.S.A" exhibition in Bucharest in 1963 was smaller, with a few cars, a house trailer, an airplane, and several other examples of American public and personal transportation.

In addition to displays, the exhibitions almost always contained live demonstrations, a library, and typically a car. Russian speaking American guides staffed the exhibitions and were available to discuss life as a typical American as well as explain the displays. Household goods, frivolous cultural items such as toys and musical records were prominently displayed alongside

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on the ANEM, read Susan E. Reid, "Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008).

<sup>11</sup> George Schreiber, "Plastics-U.S.A a 'Smash Hit' in Three Soviet Union Cities," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 5, 1961.

heavy industrial and technical items. The American government intended the exhibitions to present the best of culture, society, and technological advances of the United States in what they believed to be the most impressive way possible.

First, it is important to consider the locations of the cultural exchange exhibitions, their content, and the time period in which they were staged. Comment books were provided at every exhibition, allowing Soviet visitors to record their impressions. This study will use comment books from seven exhibitions, five from locations within the Soviet Union, and two from Eastern Europe. The second exhibition staged by the American government in the Soviet Union was the “Plastics U.S.A” exhibition, held Kiev, Ukraine in 1961. Later exhibitions in the Soviet Union considered in this study include the “Research and Development U.S.A” exhibition held in Kazan, Tartarstan and Donetsk, Ukraine in 1972, the “Outdoor Recreation U.S.A” exhibition held in Kishinev, Moldavia in 1974, and the “Photography U.S.A” exhibition held in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan in 1976. The Eastern European exhibitions considered are the “Plastics U.S.A” exhibition, held in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1963, and the “Transportation U.S.A” in Bucharest, Romania, also in 1963.

In addition to understanding the specific exhibitions themselves, it is also important to understand the reasons why, at the height of the Cold War, both America and the Soviet Union agreed to participate in a lengthy cultural exchange. When the outward reasons of friendly exchange are put aside, separate and highly competitive motives are revealed. While America simply wanted to destroy communism through cultural infiltration, the Soviet Union allowed the exhibitions primarily to gain the competitive advantage in the Cold War, and therefore defeat American capitalism.

The American exhibitions, which continued well into the 1980s, were designed by the agency of the government responsible for monitoring and directing international opinion of America: the United States Information Agency (USIA). The USIA displayed opulent consumer oriented exhibits intended to create a desire for the fruits of the capitalist system among Soviet visitors. According to historian Walter Hixson, "...Washington sought to exploit an unprecedented opportunity for propaganda and cultural infiltration of the USSR."<sup>12</sup> Based on a US government document, the exhibitions were intended to counter "communist fiction" and increase the general knowledge of America. "The United States would portray itself as 'progressive' and 'dynamic,' 'free' and 'creative,' 'peace-loving' and 'well-rounded.'"<sup>13</sup> The American government intended to hide these propagandistic motives, in hopes that they would not undermine the intended effect of the exhibitions. Hopefully, the items displayed and the present vision of America would incite the Soviet visitors to throw off their communist system and accept capitalism.

Considering the motives of the USIA and the American government, why would the Soviet leaders ever allow such blatant propaganda to be viewed by their citizens? According to historian Susan Reid, Khrushchev was hardly unaware of what the American government intended to accomplish with their exhibitions.<sup>14</sup> But still the Soviet government allowed the exhibitions to continue, with little to no censorship or discouragement. There are many possible reasons why these exhibitions were allowed by the Soviet government. According to Reid, they primarily were seen as a chance to get ahead of America in terms of technology. She claims that "The strategic access the exhibition was expected to afford to the latest Western scientific and

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 165.

<sup>13</sup> Hixson, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Susan E. Reid, "Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 862.



technological developments was so essential in the postwar world that it outweighed the risks of ideological contamination.”<sup>15</sup> Reid argues that in the mind of the Soviet government, gaining the upper hand in Cold War competition was worth a calculated risk.

The Soviet government may not have considered the presence of the American exhibitions as a serious threat to ideological control. Reid says

...[W]e should not underestimate the Marxist regime’s conviction of the historical superiority of socialism. Khrushchev and the Party premised decisions on their own projection of the ideal, Soviet person as a rational being who understood that the greatest good of the largest number of people lay not in capitalist self interest and acquisitiveness, but in the ‘alternative vision of collective well-being’ offered by socialism.<sup>16</sup>

Surprisingly enough, the government placed a lot of faith in the socialist convictions of their citizens and the seemingly obvious correctness of their political system. The Soviet government may have also felt that their own exhibitions would be more successful than the American ones. The exhibitions staged by the Soviet Union in the 1930s were known to be highly successful, and there is no reason why Khrushchev might have perceived his exhibitions as being anything different.<sup>17</sup> As this study will later show, this trust was not entirely misplaced.

The comment books are an important reflection of Soviet and Eastern European society, but are not without their limitations. Some visitors may have felt required to either be negative, or positive depending on the situation. It is acknowledged that some negative propaganda about the content of the exhibition may have been circulated, and that at some of the early exhibitions government spies may have been watching and reading the comment books.<sup>18</sup> This pressure from the government may have influenced the responses of the visitors.

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<sup>15</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 864.

<sup>16</sup> Reid, 864.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 862.

<sup>18</sup> For an example of rumors of negative propaganda, see Christopher Wren, “Soviets Ask Many Questions At U.S. Recreation Display,” *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), Mar. 9, 1974.

The comment books used in this study were obtained through the National Archives and Records Administration, from the United States Information Agency's records. Government translators translated these comment books into English to be used by government officials, probably to gauge Soviet and Eastern European opinions of America. Some of these translated books are listed as "partial," so it is quite possible that some comments have been left out. Given that the criteria for how the comments were selected is unknown, the representative nature of the translated comment books cannot be entirely known.

Another major limit of this source is that it is almost impossible to determine any information about the identity of the authors of the comments. In the majority of comments it is almost impossible to discern the gender of the visitor, their age, occupation, as well as their ethnicity. While many comments were signed, most signatures were apparently illegible. Some visitors identify themselves by their career, but many do not. Many visitors traveled from other countries in order to attend these exhibitions. It is also common knowledge that many of the big cities in the Soviet Union had large populations of ethnic Russians. Therefore, just because an exhibition was in Tartarstan, it would not be accurate to assume that the majority of the visitors to the exhibition were ethnic Tartars.

While comment books reveal the opinions of the visitors, it is often important to use design documents, or information on the designing and description of the exhibitions themselves, to understand the views of the exhibition hosts. As the comment books were unaccompanied by design documents, they will not play a role in this study. Instead, the comments alone will be used, and the study will specifically analyze Soviet and Eastern European opinions of America. Descriptions of exhibition content will be taken from American newspaper reports and other secondary sources.

The background of the cultural exchange exhibitions only hints at the role that cultural exchange played in the Cold War. Analysis of the opinions expressed in the comment books will further illustrate the reactions of some Soviet and Eastern European citizens to American culture and its effect on Soviet society.

### Research Questions

The cultural exchange exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s have been relatively untouched by historians. The main questions answered by this study are: What were the reactions of Soviet and Eastern European visitors to the cultural exchange exhibitions? How could those reactions be interpreted within domestic and international cultural contexts? What do their reactions reveal about the Soviet and Eastern European citizens' views of America, their own society, and themselves? What do they say about the popular support, or lack of it, for communism as an ideology and as a regime? How did these exhibitions affect Soviet culture, in particular consumerism?

### Methods

A large part of this topic deals with inter-cultural exchange between two essentially hostile countries. It is important to realize that this exchange did not occur in a vacuum; both countries involved had their own internal issues and specific world views. As with any inter-cultural communications, misunderstandings occurred as viewpoints clashed. Cultural anthropological theory will be used to understand the nature of these misunderstandings, and of the cultural exchange itself.

Much of this study is informed by strain theory. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his article “Ideology as a Cultural System,” discusses how ideologies develop as a result of both external and internal strains on a society. Geertz claims that no society is perfect and is always subject to “chronic malintegration” and inequities.<sup>19</sup> Structural problems are felt individually as personal insecurity and even desperation. These feelings of insecurity and desperation are alleviated by the development of what he calls “ideological thought”. “Ideological thought is, then, regarded as (one sort of) response to this desperation...It provides a ‘symbolic outlet’ for emotional disturbances generated by social disequilibrium.”<sup>20</sup> Geertz lists four different explanations, or ways that ideology eases strain in a society: the cathartic, the morale, the solidarity, and the advocacy. To this study, the morale reaction is the most important. According to Geertz, “By the ‘morale explanation’ is meant the ability of an ideology to sustain individuals (or groups) in the face of chronic strain, either by denying it outright, or by legitimizing it in terms of higher values.”<sup>21</sup> In a society where ideology is considered important to many, it is not surprising that in the face of strain, comfort could be found in ideological beliefs. In this case, the external strain was brought on by the cultural exchange exhibitions themselves.

### Chapter Outlines

Chapter one will explore the defensive reactions of many Soviet visitors and the openness of the Eastern Europeans. The citizens of the Soviet Union responded to the exhibitions very differently than the Eastern Europeans did. While many of the Soviet visitors became defensive,

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<sup>19</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 203.

<sup>20</sup> Geertz, 204.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

the Eastern Europeans became more open and interested in American technology. Despite their defensiveness, most Soviet visitors were interested in learning about America. The Soviet desire to compete with the United States led many of them to be increasingly defensive of their way of life in the face of what they perceived to be American superiority. Instead of expressing the desire for cooperation and exchange found in many of the Eastern European comments, most Soviet visitors wished Americans to know that they were just as good, if not better. This defensive reaction was shown in the negative comments that centered on many issues that Soviet citizens had with America, despite their interest.

Chapter two discusses the upswing in communist morale felt by Soviet visitors to the exhibitions. Based on the theories proposed by Geertz, the comment books are interpreted to show how some visitors fell back on the familiarity of their ideology when confronted with information that challenged perceived notions. Their ideology allowed them to view the items on display as unnecessary or negative, the products of a system that was both racist and unfair to the working man. The discourse on America created by the comment books gave visitors a chance to attack the decisions of the American government, and the social problems occurring within America, such as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The public nature of the comment books also created a unique public discourse between visitors where various opinions could be debated.

Chapter three examines the desire for competition that some Soviet visitors expressed in their comments. These comments reflect common areas of competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, such as space technology. Commenting on current events revealed the competitive feelings between the two countries. Many visitors claimed that the technology displayed was obsolete or unsurprising, but still expressed a desire to surpass America and prove

that their system was superior. This chapter will also examine the effect the exhibitions had on consumerism in the Soviet Union. Consumerism was not a new concept in the Soviet Union. Since the 1930s, the Soviet government had attempted to influence taste, provide ideologically friendly alternatives, and generally satisfy desires in a way that would not overrun the economy. While the comment books contain both negative and positive comments concerning American consumer goods, the majority of visitors expressed a longing for the goods on display. This longing and sense of entitlement was proved to be the ultimate failure of the Soviet government to properly satisfy the desires of the Soviet people.

The reactions of the Soviet and Eastern European visitors to the cultural exchange exhibitions were many and varied. While this study concentrates on three reactions, it is important to remember that in such a large area with so many different nationalities and ways of seeing the world that reactions cannot be entirely uniform.

## CHAPTER 1: “AMERICA GOOD, RUSSIA BETTER”: SOVIET DEFENSIVE REACTIONS AND EASTERN EUROPEAN OPENNESS

The signing of the Cultural Exchange Agreement in 1958 allowed the American government to send an exhibition to the Soviet Union in 1959, while the Soviets were allowed to send one to America in the following year. The 1959 exhibition, known as the American National Exhibition, was the start in a series that confronted Soviet and Eastern European citizens with a taste of what life was like in a capitalist society such as America. De-Stalinization and The Thaw allowed western culture and society to penetrate further into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The opening up of the communist society not only revealed a new standard of living, but also new ideas about government, society, and politics. The resulting strains and new experiences contributed to the historical course of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The Thaw allowed Soviet and Eastern European citizens to experience American culture, but also unearthed old strains in their society and created new ones as well. The quality of the products displayed and the difference between the qualities of life could not fail to amplify problems in a society that continually denied its own inequalities and problems. While both Soviet and Eastern European citizens were interested in America, the Soviet visitors tended to be more cautious, while the Eastern Europeans were overtly positive.

### Defensive Reactions of Soviet Visitors

The death of Stalin in 1953 changed many things for the Soviet Union. In the following decades, the Soviet Union had two leaders who had very different ideas about how the country should be run. This change in a government created a new strain for citizens to contend with, as it filtered down from governmental policy to society and culture.

Their new leader, Nikita Khrushchev, immediately began a plan of “de-Stalinization,” or reversal of many of the policies of the former leader and his regime. As part of competition with the United States and a general movement towards modernization, Soviet leadership placed emphasis on science, technology, higher education, and gave more freedom to the intellectuals. Less fear of political repression resulted in diverse public opinions and increased cultural expression. Despite this new openness for intellectuals, Khrushchev remained uncommitted to any specific type of policy, and the program of de-Stalinization frequently stopped and was restarted. Khrushchev’s lack of any true commitment or clarity would eventually begin to conflict with new ideas that resulted from the intellectual openness.

In his one decisive and defining move, Khrushchev denounced the crimes of the Stalinist era and claimed to be a true follower of Lenin. In his secret speech to the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in February 1956, he accused Stalin of creating a personality cult, claiming to be infallible, ordering the murders of honest and loyal communists, and inaction during the initial phase of World War II which almost led to the defeat of the USSR and countless casualties. This speech, which also promised basic political reforms, won Khrushchev the support of the younger, provincial party leaders who believed that he was a true reform leader.<sup>1</sup> The sudden intellectual freedom and lack of political repression led to a division among Soviet citizens. Liberals enjoyed the freedom, delving into American culture and new forms of modernist creative expression in literature, art, and music. Simultaneously, a conservative backlash developed, focused on repressing what they felt was offensive and inappropriate culture. Many of these conservatives were already installed

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<sup>1</sup> David Mackenzie and Michael W. Curran, *A History of the Soviet Union* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 362.



in the upper echelons of the government. Both groups fought to gain the favor of Khrushchev, who was increasingly unpredictable and impulsive in terms of his policies.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after gaining control of the country, Khrushchev was unable to maintain the favor of the growing class of intellectuals that originally supported his campaign of de-Stalinization. An uneducated and somewhat crass personality, Khrushchev was unable to appreciate modern culture, and was unafraid to publicly admit it. In December 1962, along with several Presidium members, he made an unannounced visit to a retrospective art exhibition called “Thirty Years of Soviet Art.” Cultural conservatives added seventy-five modernistic canvases and sculptures to the exhibition at the Manezh Gallery, apparently to provoke their leader.<sup>3</sup> After examining these artworks, Khrushchev reportedly said

I would say this is a mess...as though some child had done his business on the canvas when his mother was away and then spread it around with his hands...As long as I am chairman of the Council of Ministers, we are going to support a genuine art. We aren't going to give a kopeck for pictures painted by jackasses.<sup>4</sup>

He did not limit his critiques of modern culture to art either, saying “When I hear jazz, it’s as if I had gas on the stomach. I used to think it was static when I heard it on the radio.”<sup>5</sup> While directly confronting one painter, but referring to all modernist painters in the Soviet Union, “You’ve either got to get out [of the USSR] or paint differently. As you are, there’s no future for you on our soil...Gentlemen, we are declaring war on you.”<sup>6</sup> These harsh and disgusting criticisms were overtly threatening. As intended by conservatives, Khrushchev’s violently negative reaction to the modern art further alienated him from his original supporters.

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<sup>2</sup> William Tompson, *The Soviet Union Under Brezhnev* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 4.

<sup>3</sup> David Mackenzie and Michael W. Curran, *A History of the Soviet Union* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 393.

<sup>4</sup> Mackenzie and Curran, 394.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

In addition to upsetting the liberal intellectuals, Khrushchev's dramatic political choices often upset the party officials, especially the more conservative ones. According to political scientist William Tompson, his decision in 1962 to split the Communist Party's territorial apparatus into "agricultural" and "industrial" segments was "an administrative disaster and a major blow to incumbent officials, who found half their authority transferred to newly appointed rivals."<sup>7</sup> His process of de-Stalinization interrupted the status quo, and his early associations with the liberal intellectual elite did not gain him any favor among the established conservative neo-Stalinists.

By alienating his original supporters and upsetting the more conservative members of government, Khrushchev created significant confusion and frustration among many Soviet citizens due to his leadership style. Tompson states that

Conservatives, especially in the military and security organs, were antagonized by his determination to control military expenditure, his pursuit of détente with the West, and his increasingly aggressive pursuit of de-Stalinization. More reform-minded members of the elite had come to see him as an unreliable patron for the causes of both de-Stalinization and economic reform.<sup>8</sup>

Khrushchev became the first Soviet leader to leave office before death because of his inconsistencies, leading the country for eleven years.

His successor, Leonid Brezhnev, was a very different type of leader. Known to be unassociated with any strong ideological tendency, Brezhnev was a true compromise between liberal and conservative groups and in some respects, presented a positive contrast to Khrushchev. According to historian Vladislav Zubok, "It was as natural for Brezhnev to smile cordially as for Khrushchev to threaten with his fist."<sup>9</sup> After taking power in 1964, Brezhnev

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<sup>7</sup> William Tompson, *The Soviet Union Under Brezhnev* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Tompson, 4

<sup>9</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 203.

exercised somewhat conservative cultural policies, while still essentially taking the middle ground. For example, de-Stalinization was halted, but the steps to reverse the process were slow and incomplete, frustrating both its supporters and those against it. Brezhnev and his regime were known for what Tompson refers to as “soft repression.”<sup>10</sup> There was greater clarity about what was allowed and what was not, and the authorities, such as the KGB, were less likely to immediately resort to arrest and imprison violators. Interest in America remained, and even grew as Soviet citizens gained even more access to cultural items such as American music. The government partially accepted these forms of expression, after failing to ban or co-opt them for their own use and control.

In addition to changing governmental policy, the Soviet Union was experiencing other internal strains such as malintegration. Living standards became another internal strain, as conditions improved slightly, only to eventually deteriorate. Saratov, a city in southern Russia, contained many military factories that offered competitive pay and provided extra services for their workers. By the late 1970s, the economic situation had deteriorated to such an extent that many of the residents of Saratov had to travel to Moscow just to get food to eat and other essential consumer items.<sup>11</sup> The cultural exchange exhibitions may have reminded some Soviet citizens of problems such as these in their own society that they may have wished to leave unacknowledged. These strains were sometimes exacerbated by the Americans and their displays.

The Soviet Union was a country that contained many different ethnic groups that had different cultures, as well as spoke different languages. When planning the exhibits, the USIA clearly paid attention to this diversity, and may have even used it to their advantage. Guides that

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<sup>10</sup> William Tompson, *The Soviet Union Under Brezhnev* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 103.

<sup>11</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Nook edition, 263-264.

spoke local languages were often present at the exhibitions and the effort was appreciated. One visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan said “Thanks to your guides for their good knowledge of both Russian and Tartar.”<sup>12</sup> The Americans even had a guide of Tartar heritage at two of their research and development exhibitions in 1972. Golnar Sala was an ethnic Tartar, born in Sweden but living in New York. “They say, ‘you speak pure Tartar, don’t you- no Russian words?’” The visitors were amazed to the point of disbelief to find out that her parents were allowed to continue practicing the Muslim faith and were not pressured by the government to speak only English, that she was allowed to attend college, and also that they did not have to register as Tartars on their passports or identity papers.<sup>13</sup> Anthropologist Clifford Geertz claims that no society is devoid of inequalities or problems, and that strain is often caused by malintegration. “No social arrangement is or can be completely successful in coping with the functional problems it inevitably faces.”<sup>14</sup> When the Americans respected the separate cultures of the members of the Soviet Union, they reminded them of their malintegration and raised an old strain to the surface.

The political, social, and cultural developments created by the end of Stalinism and the beginning of the Thaw led to increased interest in Americans and their society and culture, which continued into the 1960s and 1970s. This interest, however, did not always result in a positive opinion, as many Soviet visitors seemed to feel personally insulted by what they saw at the exhibitions. These new opinions were at odds with the image of America and Americans present in Soviet propaganda. According to historian Vladislav Zubok, a dualistic image of the United

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<sup>12</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Parks, “Soviets Have No Idea What U.S. Life is Really All About,” *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Sept. 25, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 203.

States existed in Soviet propaganda during the Khrushchev era. “One was the modified version of the traditional Stalinist enemy image in which the United States remained the big ‘other’ that opposed the Soviet Union; American capitalism and the American way of life were presented as antithetical to Soviet ‘socialism’ and way of life.”<sup>15</sup> One guide from the “Photography U.S.A” in 1976 exhibition observed the defensive reaction of Soviet visitors:

But many of them know very well we have a higher standard of living than they do... They know that East Germans and other Eastern Europeans have better things than they do, and they know we have more than the East Europeans... In fact, I think they tend to be defensive about their country and quite insecure.<sup>16</sup>

This guide’s comment clearly illustrates the immediate defensive reaction of Soviet citizens. The items presented in the exhibitions were perceived as a challenge to the Soviet way of life, and although they were interested in America, they were unwilling to be unresponsive to a perceived insult.

Based on their responses to the exhibitions, it is obvious that many Soviet citizens felt that the Americans considered themselves, their society and culture to be superior. In their responses to the exhibitions, the Soviets claimed that their society and culture was superior to that of America. Many of the comments respond to a perceived threat, or challenge to the Soviet Union. One visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma Ata wrote: “...And you come here to criticize us. We, the Soviets, don’t submit to criticism.”<sup>17</sup> Since it is hard to believe that there was any direct criticism from the exhibition staff, it is obvious that this visitor felt threatened by what he/she found to be an inherent challenge. Many visitors also felt that Americans knew nothing about Soviet society. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan

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<sup>15</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 176.

<sup>16</sup> David K. Willis, “How Soviets Look at U.S.,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA), Dec. 15, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

wrote, "I liked the exhibit, but from conversations with your guides we understand that they have a far from correct understanding of our state and our social relations."<sup>18</sup> This visitor felt insulted by what he/she felt was Americans not bothering to lower themselves to learn about the Soviet Union. He/She seemed to be asking Americans how they could expect Soviet visitors to learn about America, when Americans do not bother to learn about the Soviet way of life?

Some Soviet visitors often did not believe what they saw at the exhibitions, convincing themselves that it was all propaganda. In addition to believing that the guides were lying to them, many Soviets considered themselves to be experts on American society but still claimed to be uninformed and interested in learning about American life. A visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma Ata commented:

At the exhibit the pictures are not bad. But the guides talk mostly about the American way of life, and in the area of photography, they are weak. We want to know as much as possible about American life. We are for broad cultural exchanges in the spirit of Helsinki.<sup>19</sup>

This demonstrates the Soviet interest in American life. As the commenter continued, the defensive reaction becomes readily apparent.

But we are extremely dissatisfied because the guides are giving false information about unemployment, the cost of education, the cost of health care, etc. Why mislead us, why assume we know nothing about life in America? We are Soviet people, we well know what life in America is like. We know you have great unemployment, you have people living in poverty, as the American president himself admitted. Please, the guides should speak the truth and not mislead us.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>19</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>20</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 6 and 7.

This visitor complained about the lack of information on American life, while also showing disappointment that the guides can only speak of the positive aspects of American life. It appears that this visitor was exposed to negative propaganda concerning American politics and social policy, and felt the guides were lying when they refused to talk about negative aspects of American life. He/she clearly had a set idea about what the truth about America was, and was unprepared and unwilling to accept other interpretations. This visitor also wanted the Americans to know that he/she was aware of propaganda tactics and could not be fooled. He/she also sought to make himself or herself feel secure in their world view by asking the guides to “speak the truth and not mislead us.” Thinking that only negative information about America was true and dismissing any other interpretations allowed this visitor to preserve the way they saw the world. This shows the continued influence of negative propaganda meeting and influencing the growing interest in American culture. Another visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan noticed something that they considered wrong.

I was at the exhibit twice, at the opening and now today. What did I notice right away? Our public, mainly workers, civil servants, interested in the same questions about America, but the answers of July 17 and August 3 noticeably had changed their content. In addition, the answers which your guides gave today were more in line with your political policy than those previous. You were not prepared, obviously, before for such questions.<sup>21</sup>

The writer of this comment clearly believed that the guides were spouting American propaganda, and went out of his/her way to prove to the organizers of the exhibition that he/she was aware of this. It is possible, however, that the guides were asked to alter the way they responded to political questions. Because the Soviet government often lied to its people, the visitors to the

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<sup>21</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

exhibition had no reason to expect anything different of the American government and its representatives, the exhibition guides.

Just like Khrushchev, the Soviet visitors seemed to dislike modern art. However, this dislike of modern, abstract expressionist art seemed to be more about defending their own cultural tastes than mere dislike. The “Plastics U.S.A” exhibition in Kiev in 1961 contained a large section of cutting edge, abstract art that featured the use of plastic materials. The negative response to the work of the American abstract expressionists was so overwhelming that it appears that abstract art was not included in future “Plastics U.S.A” exhibitions such as the one in Bulgaria in 1963. Even visitors who were interested or impressed by the rest of the exhibition felt the need to say something negative about the art. For example, “We liked everything except abstractionism.”<sup>22</sup> The plastics technology that accompanied the art, which many considered to be backward, posed no threat to the visitors culturally as it was something that they could understand. The average visitor found the art ugly, impossible to understand (or for the guides to explain), at a low skill level, and probably made by a mad man. “Your abstractionist art is a raving of a madman.”<sup>23</sup> According to the visitors, modern art or pictures that could not be understood must either have been created by people who were not normal mentally or was some sort of cultural snobbery. One visitor even felt threatened by the presentation of this type of art and reacted defensively:

Sometimes the so-called abstractionist art expresses the mood of the artist, but the majority of the works represented here are rather made on the assumption that the

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<sup>22</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>23</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9.



spectator will think he is too backward to understand them, although actually the artist does not know more than the spectator.<sup>24</sup>

This last comment is especially revealing. The visitor responded in a very aggressive manner, when he/she could have simply ignored the art entirely if they did not like it. Instead of appreciating it for its aesthetic qualities or skipping that particular exhibit, he/she felt that there must be some ulterior motive or message as to why this particular style of art was at the exhibition. As the art was by American artists and shown at an exhibition of American culture and technology, it must be assumed that the Soviet viewer would believe that the art was beyond them culturally. Defending his/her intellect and country, this visitor wished to remind the organizers of the exhibition that Soviets were not culturally backwards, and was, in a sense, on to them and completely aware of what they were doing.

In addition to the previous negative propaganda concerning America, Zubok suggests an additional positive message also developed. “Another message was a rather positive picture of American society as an umbrella for both foes and friends, and of U.S. technological achievements as a blueprint for Soviet technological progress.”<sup>25</sup> The best example of the influence of this positive message are the comments from the “Outdoor Recreation U.S.A” exhibition in Kishinev, Moldavia. Based on the comment books, Moldavians did not have the same defensive attitude towards America as the rest of the Soviet Union, but had the same high level of curiosity about America. The “Outdoor Recreation U.S.A” exhibition in Kishinev in 1974 received overflow crowds of 9,000 to 11,000 every day, despite rumors that local officials had been discouraging visiting.<sup>26</sup> A visitor to the Moldavian exhibition commented: “We really

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<sup>24</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*,”Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9.

<sup>25</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 176.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher S. Wren, “Soviets Ask Many Questions At U.S. Recreation Display,” *Nashua Telegraph* (Nashua, NH), Mar. 9, 1974.

liked your exhibit and we really really liked you.”<sup>27</sup> Many visitors to the other exhibitions in other parts of the Soviet Union expressed favorable feelings towards America, but never so positively, and almost never without any criticism. Even more Moldavian visitors expressed an interest in visiting America, which many other Soviet visitors did not appear to desire. A Moldavian visitor said “We visited your exhibit. It was magnificent! How we should love to visit your country.”<sup>28</sup> Wanting to listen to American music, read American literature or buy American consumer goods was one thing, but expressing a desire to visit is more personal and shows a deeper interest in all things American. Also common among Moldavian visitors was a desire to adopt American habits, such as traveling or going on vacation, or shopping for consumer goods. “I would like to know: 1) What special privileges do tourists in groups enjoy, and 2) what is the cost of rented tourism equipment (tents, rucksacks, shoes, etc.)?”<sup>29</sup> This comment sounds as though this visitor would like to make concrete plans to take an American style vacation. “There are three of us and we all got a big kick out of the exhibit. And not because the exhibit increased our knowledge of tourism and recreation in the USA, but because the exhibit testifies to the growing friendship between our peoples.”<sup>30</sup> Besides showing a determined interest, the Moldavian visitors were positive about maintaining good relations with America in the future, and often expressed it in a way that seemed genuine. The Moldavian comment book proves how

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<sup>27</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Outdoor Recreation U.S.A, Kishinev, U.S.S.R, 1974*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>28</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Outdoor Recreation U.S.A, Kishinev, U.S.S.R, 1974*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

<sup>29</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Outdoor Recreation U.S.A, Kishinev, U.S.S.R, 1974*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

<sup>30</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Outdoor Recreation U.S.A, Kishinev, U.S.S.R, 1974*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

varied opinions could be, and that Soviet Union was anything but monolithic in terms of its reactions to the arrival of American society, culture, and technology.

### Openness of Eastern European Visitors

The Eastern European visitors to the exhibitions had a very different type of reaction to the arrival of displays depicting American society and culture. Instead of becoming defensive, Eastern Europeans appeared to become excited by what they were seeing, sometimes preferring it to their own lifestyle and desiring to purchase the products that were on display. Based on the comments left by visitors from two exhibits staged in Eastern Europe, “Plastics U.S.A” in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1963, “Transportation U.S.A” in Bucharest, Romania in 1963, Eastern Europe was very interested in American society and products and cooperation instead of communist ideology and defensiveness.

The “Transportation U.S.A” exhibition that was staged in Bucharest in 1963 was so popular that the first day it opened, 5,000 visitors were waiting outside at 10 am to see the relatively small exhibition. At closing time, there were so many visitors waiting outside that guides began to inform people that the exhibition was closing and that there were many days remaining for them to attend. Instead of leaving, the people outside attempted to run past the barriers towards the doors of the exhibition building. The situation became so dramatic that the Romanian police had to be called in to erect iron barriers and inform the hopeful visitors that there would be no more visiting the exhibition that day.<sup>31</sup>

This mania for American society and culture is evident also in the comment books from both exhibitions. The visitors to the exhibitions are overly positive, and it is challenging to find

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<sup>31</sup> David Miller, “U.S. Show Big In Bucharest,” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA), Oct. 7, 1963.

any negative or critical comments. Many visitors wished to see and learn more about America, and almost all of them wanted a return visit. One visitor to the Romanian exhibition wrote:

“Beautiful, beautiful! Marvelous! But we wish you would return with more exhibits which would reflect present day achievements in their entirety.”<sup>32</sup> Many Soviet comments express a desire for a return of American exhibitions, but it was typically accompanied by a negative comment on the size of the exhibition or a desire for Americans to learn more about the Soviet way of life. It is obvious that the Eastern Europeans wished to see as much as they could of what the Americans had to offer.

The desire for consumer goods was strongly evident among the Eastern European visitors. A visitor to the Bulgarian exhibition wrote:

When are we going to have more such exhibitions- not only of plastics, but of all American products? This helps mutual understanding between the two nations. I would like to see American goods on our market. They will be bought with pleasure because everybody knows what ‘American’ means. I have no words to describe my enchantment with the exhibition. Very good! <sup>33</sup>

Many visitors expressed frustration at the lack of American goods available for purchase in their countries, and most of the few negative comments were directed at this particular problem. One visitor to the plastics exhibition in Bulgaria commented “I have the best impressions of the exhibition but don’t you believe that the people are aggravated because you do not sell anything?”<sup>34</sup> Even though the United States was allowed to exhibit their consumer items, an economic agreement was not officially in place. Some comments were negative, but directed at

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<sup>32</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Transportation U.S.A, Bucharest, Rumania, 1963*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 10(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>33</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Sofia, Bulgaria, 7/7-7/17/1963*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 10 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>34</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Sofia, Bulgaria, 7/7-7/17/1963*,“Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 10.

their own government for the lack of consumer goods. One visitor to the Romanian exhibition complained

I visited the American exposition which I greatly enjoyed because: (1) it shows good and cheap automobiles, (2) makes for cheaper transportation and for living conditions fit for a civilized year in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I wish I had also an automobile, especially as I am an intellectual, a physician, and a sick one, too, yet I do not have an automobile...<sup>35</sup>

The desire for consumer goods created a huge strain with Eastern European culture and society.

Many of the comments from the Eastern European exhibitions expressed a desire for cooperation and learning from each other. While they did not seem to always consider America to be superior, they were open to American culture and appeared to expect Americans to be open to what they had to offer in return. This positive and constructive reaction is present in many of the comment books from Eastern Europe. One visitor to the transportation exhibition in Romania commented:

It is wonderful! Instead of an exhibition, achievements worthy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I believe that the Rumanian people also have things to show to the American people. People must sometimes, somehow, understand each other. However, they must conduct their diplomatic relations in the spirit of reality universally recognized. Friendship, understanding, trade, common sense.<sup>36</sup>

Many visitors were proud of their relationship with America and wanted to further it through the exhibitions. This comment can be read as somewhat defensive, as the writer claims that the “Rumanian people also have things to show.” However, it seems as though the comment does not suggest competition, but understanding and cooperation. If there was competition, it was usually in a positive outlook, assuming that their friends the Americans would be proud of their

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<sup>35</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Transportation U.S.A, Bucharest, Rumania, 1963*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 10(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>36</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Transportation U.S.A, Bucharest, Rumania, 1963*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 10(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

progress. A visitor to the Bulgarian exhibition commented, “We visited the exhibit and were delighted with what we saw. We are students who study plastics and we promise to catch up with your technology after a while.”<sup>37</sup>

Even though they reacted differently, both Soviet and Eastern European citizens experienced internal and external strains on their society in response to the arrival of the cultural exchange exhibitions. Strains were not always external, as the presence of American culture revealed old problems in the Soviet system, such as malintegration. Many of the visitors to the exhibitions in the Soviet Union reacted defensively and criticized what they saw. However, the reactions from the Soviet Union were anything but monolithic, as proven by the comment book from the exhibition in Moldavia. Eastern European citizens reacted positively to the presence of American culture, but had a stronger negative reaction to the lack of consumer goods available in their countries. Eastern Europeans also had a stronger desire to travel to America.

These reactions also show how the stability of communism differed regionally. The defensive reaction by many Soviets, primarily the Russian Soviets, showed their acceptance of Soviet values as something organic or internal. Alternately, the desire for American consumer goods and travel to America among Eastern European visitors and the Soviet border states, such as Moldavia, showed a less stable faith in communism and Soviet values. In these regions, these values were more of an outside imposition than an internal development. Without the internalization of Soviet or communist values, there was little reason for visitors to become defensive.

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<sup>37</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Sofia, Bulgaria, 7/7-7/17/1963*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 10 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

## CHAPTER 2: “THINGS ARE BETTER IN MY NATIVE LAND”: THE MORALE REACTION

The cultural exchange exhibitions resulted in different reactions in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; certainly more defensiveness among Soviet visitors, and considerably more openness and good will in Eastern Europe. However, it is important to consider the motivations behind the defensive attitude of Soviet citizens. If their political system was not important to them, there would have been no need for them to react defensively to a perceived challenge. Therefore the defensive reaction of the Soviet citizens to the American displays reflected an upswing in morale based on communist ideology. Geertz's morale reaction allows for the examination of this upswing of morale, and how belief in an ideology can allow a society to continue along the same path.

Historian Vladislav Zubok discusses the optimistic views that some citizens held about communism during the 1960s, despite the increased interest in America. Many intellectuals felt that the end of Stalinism allowed them to return to the original communist ideas that their country started with.

The Khrushchev decade produced a new cohort of social, cultural, and political leaders, the 'men and women of the sixties,' who aspired to lead the Soviet Union down the path toward 'socialism with a human face.' Their patriotic energy and identity were based on Communist ideology and the selective idealized perceptions of the revolution and the leftist culture of the 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

Looking back before Stalin, Soviet citizens were inspired to institute a more pure brand of communism that was closer to what they believed were the original goals of Lenin. American capitalism and supposed free speech appeared to pale in the face of the possibility of a Leninist-style, equal and humane Soviet Union. These new and idealistic communist beliefs were one of

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<sup>1</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 191.

many motivations that led some Soviet citizens to renew their trust in communism and work towards a positive future for their country. For example, winning World War II was seen as proving the superiority of their system. Moreover, according to Susan Reid, many Soviet citizens did not blame their government or communist ideology for shortcomings in their living situation, but instead often found fault with World War II or the Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the upswing in communism morale, life in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s was not what was promised by the government. Khrushchev made a strong commitment to improve living standards, and solve housing and agriculture problems, despite being unable to change the direction of the economy from its heavy industry and defense goals.<sup>3</sup> Standards of living rose under Brezhnev in the beginning, but leveled off during the 1970s and became the lowest of major industrial countries.<sup>4</sup> However, many Soviets during this period earned decent wages and lived in acceptable apartments. Most had household appliances and some even owned automobiles.<sup>5</sup>

Most Soviet citizens, while not being uncritical, accepted their standard of living as normal and believed the government rhetoric that the Soviet way of life was superior. According to political scientist William Tompson, “These claims did not deny the higher levels of personal consumption found in the West but rather stressed the Soviet system’s guarantee of greater equality and material security...Broadly speaking, they believed that the Soviet way of life, while perhaps materially poorer, was morally and culturally superior to that found in the West.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 886.

<sup>3</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (2002): 221.

<sup>4</sup> David Mackenzie and Michael W. Curran, *A History of the Soviet Union* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), 437.

<sup>5</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Nook edition, 261.

<sup>6</sup> William Tompson, *The Soviet Union Under Brezhnev* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 85.



Even though the Soviet people did not gain the standard of living they were promised, ideology helped them appreciate what they did achieve.

Clifford Geertz lists four different reactions that occur when a person or a society tries to alleviate strain by falling back on ideology, but the most applicable to this situation is the morale reaction. Geertz defines a morale reaction as when a person or in this case, a society, denies the strain it is under or legitimizes it in terms of a higher power or idea. In the case of the Soviet Union, the “higher power or idea” was their communist ideology. This reaction often allows the people in the society to continue performing a task or job when they normally would have quit out of despair. This reaction goes hand in hand with a belief in the superiority of the ideological system. For example, an artist who creates unappealing art that does not sell continues express himself in that manner, because he believes that the buyers are not smart or sophisticated enough to realize his talent and message is an example of a morale reaction to strain. “Ideology bridges the emotional gap between things as they are and as one would have them be, thus insuring the performance of roles that might otherwise be abandoned in despair or apathy.”<sup>7</sup> By clinging to their familiar ideology, Soviet citizens were able to continue performing tasks that they might have stopped due to a revived belief in communist ideology.

### Communist Morale Among Visitors

The comment books show a society that was interested in American culture and society, but unconvinced that it was necessarily superior, favoring an optimistic and idealistic plan for their own culture. Soviet society was hardly any better after the death of Stalin, especially in terms of integration and ethnic issues, as society struggled to find its place under the leadership

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<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 205.

of an inconsistent politician. Reid says that “Amid the flux and fundamental reorientation, it is not surprising if many individuals were uncertain about what was sanctioned by the Party and what was not...Some responded to disorientation by anchoring themselves to dogma.”<sup>8</sup> Many Soviet citizens clung to what they were familiar with and what allowed them to maintain their self-respect and identity in the face of confusion and potential damaging information: communist ideology.

Despite the change in leadership in 1964, the comment books demonstrate that the optimistic feelings remained. The promise of the end of Stalinist communism and the hope of a return to the original goals of the Soviet Union created a renewed belief in communism and optimism for the future. Their ideology taught them that giving up certain personal freedoms or luxury items was necessary to guarantee greater societal good. This ideological fervor helped them dismiss positive images of American life as irrelevant concerning their ideological commitments, identity and self-respect. Denying a strain is much easier than coping with it, and their particular ideology gave them the perfect opportunity to do so.

Many comments criticize the political choices of the United States government. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States was involved in many controversial and world changing events, such as the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam War. America also experienced significant internal issues during this time period. The 1960s and 1970s in America are characterized by such events as the assassination of President Kennedy, civil unrest concerning civil rights and other issues, and the Watergate scandal and eventual resignation of President Nixon. The Soviet visitors were also able to rationalize America’s problems in ideological terms. Vietnam, for example, could be seen as a direct result of the capitalist system. The use of police force against

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<sup>8</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 882.

anti-war and civil rights demonstrators was seen as further negative results of a capitalist system. Therefore, the Soviet citizens were quick to criticize Americans for their choices and involvement in certain events and often challenged guides directly on the actions of their country. Douglas Kingsley, a Georgetown graduate, served as a guide for the research and development exhibition and recalled many Soviet visitors asking him questions such as “Why won’t the United States get out of Vietnam? Why is there still racial discrimination in your country?” While Kingsley tried to explain that not all Americans supported the Vietnam War, and that there was another side, he was shouted down.<sup>9</sup> Because the Vietnam War was seen so negatively by so many in the Soviet Union, it became an issue that many Soviet visitors were adamant about.

The comment books from the “Research and Development U.S.A” exhibitions, held in 1972 in Donetsk and Kazan are full of negative comments on the involvement of America in the Vietnam War. This negativity on the war most likely comes from the character of the war itself. The North Vietnamese were attempting to unite Vietnam under communist rule. Initially, the Soviet leadership was wary of becoming involved in the Vietnam War, as they quickly realized that it would jeopardize their chances of a détente with the American government. Still, according to historian Vladislav Zubok, the Soviet government still took a firm stance on American military action in Vietnam. “Still, American intervention in Vietnam stoked the ideological instincts of the collective leadership and the Soviet military and led to a serious deterioration of Soviet-American relations. The party organized mass propaganda campaigns, demonstrations, and meetings of ‘solidarity with people of Vietnam’ around the Soviet Union.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Michael Parks, “Russians Boggle at U.S. Goods and Marylander’s Story,” *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Mar. 4, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 198.

The Soviet visitors and their government were in synch on this particular issue. The reactions of the Soviet visitors were highly influenced by their government, which seemed to be unable to resist falling back on its ideology.

Despite the fact that not all capitalist countries were involved in the Vietnam War, Soviet visitors were quick to remind America of the immorality of their capitalist system. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk commented, “It’s hard to believe that a country with such advanced technology can use it against the people of Vietnam.”<sup>11</sup> Given that many other comments that claim the technology shown is backwards, it is hard to tell if this visitor is being genuine or sarcastic; still, it is clear what he/she thought of American involvement in Vietnam. A visitor to the Kazan exhibition wrote: “Progress is fine, but it’s time to aim it at peaceful pursuits, and not at Vietnam!”<sup>12</sup> Concentrating on ideology allowed this visitor to justify what he/she was seeing. Even though America was progressing, it was not a good progress because the American government was involved in something that was ideologically unsound. In a post-World War II Soviet Union, maintaining peace and avoiding war were important to both the government and the people. Therefore many visitors were probably amazed at the idea of a world power starting a war against a smaller, weaker country. Criticizing the Vietnam War became a way for Soviet citizens to avoid information that was potentially damaging to their worldview.

Many Soviet citizens claimed that their life in the Soviet Union was far superior to that of Americans, despite not having many of the items on display. Many visitors appeared to comfort

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<sup>11</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>12</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

themselves through the belief that the items that they were seeing were not available to all Americans. Reid writes “Viewers questioned ANEM’s (American National Exhibition’s) veracity as a reflection of ‘typical’ conditions existing on a mass scale, rather than as a Socialist realist depiction of American ‘reality in its revolutionary development,’ advertising, or propaganda: it was a projection for the future or at most, a ‘reality’ available only to a privileged minority.”<sup>13</sup> Repeatedly acknowledging the lack of American equality allowed them to distance themselves from potentially subversive information that conflicted with their worldview. One visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk commented “...Our Soviet achievements are for our use; that is, available to all. And yours?”<sup>14</sup> This visitor claims that his/her society was equal, and questioned the equality of American society. Another visitor to the same exhibition in Kazan wrote “Congratulations! It would be nice if all this would become accessible to the average American.”<sup>15</sup> This visitor further questioned American equality, suggesting that the items on display were unavailable to most of society. These opinions were based primarily on ideology. The ideology was more positive, and gave the average Soviet citizen hope to continue on living his or her life without consumer items. A visitor to the exhibit in Donetsk wrote “It would be much better if instead of an electric knife on a counter in your stores, a cheaper loaf of bread would appear, etc.”<sup>16</sup> This visitor implied that the American government thought more about having advanced technology than caring for their people, placing emphasis on fancy knives

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<sup>13</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 892.

<sup>14</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>15</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>16</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

rather than food that all could afford. Commenting on the inequality of American society shows how the Soviet visitors resorted to ideological clichés in the face of a potential strain. The Soviet people assumed that only rich Americans could buy the items on display, and that the exhibitions were designed to hide that fact.

All Soviet visitors seemed to think that certain sectors of American society were underrepresented in all the exhibitions. Many visitors referred to one group in particular, the “working man.” An important figure in Soviet ideology, the “working man” was harder to conceptually pinpoint in America’s capitalist society, ideologically self-defined by its large and rapidly growing middle class. However, this did not deter Soviet visitors from searching for his place in American society and worrying that he was properly cared for and valued. A visitor to the Kazan exhibition said “We’re glad you came. But we didn’t like the fact that you came with a lie. Here is displayed the life of a very small number of Americans. The black people and others: workers and farmers, cannot obtain the things which are on display...”<sup>17</sup> This visitor, among many, seemed to believe that members of this group were too poor to purchase these items and that the organizers of the exhibition wished to disguise this fact. A visitor at the Donetsk exhibition agreed, saying “There is a lot of interesting things but everything is made for the upper classes, not for the common people...a bunch of lies.”<sup>18</sup> These visitors felt that the luxury items in the exhibition were unavailable to their beloved “working man” and therefore nothing they saw could be considered good or positive. Soviet visitors then could conclude that their society of “working men” was in a much better state than the “working men” of America,

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<sup>17</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>18</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

who surely toiled endlessly to ease the lives of the upper class, with little to no thanks or representation in the exhibitions.

The photographs in “Photography U.S.A” exhibition in Alma Ata led to serious concern among the Soviet visitors for the “working man.” Countless comments questioned his place and value in society, as many felt that he was not properly represented or completely absent. “The exhibit doesn’t show the working man upon whose successes is dependent everything we have.”<sup>19</sup> Another comment said simply “You could show more of the working man.”<sup>20</sup> Another visitor touched on other issues as well, saying “I expected much more from the exhibit. You don’t show anything at all of average American workers and farmers. And where are the American Negroes [?] (After all, the Negro question is a problem for the USA)”<sup>21</sup> While aware of the American conception of the “working man,” the Soviet visitors considered only their version to be the only correct one. Upon seeing no images of the life of the “working man,” or discovering that he could not own the things displayed, the visitors dismissed the information as irrelevant to their lives. Sometimes this might even have been seen as an example of American capitalist cunning. The idea of upward social mobility has always been an important part of American society, and as prosperity created a growing middle class the American “working man” was often considered to be middle class, or at least claimed himself to be so. Cultural misunderstandings are not uncommon, but in this case the misunderstanding was greater than normal. This exacerbation was due to the ideological and confrontational framework that prevented proper inter-cultural communication.

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<sup>19</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>20</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7.

<sup>21</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7.

Criticizing American society was also common among the visitors to the exhibitions, especially those attending the “Photography U.S.A” exhibition in Alma Ata in 1976. In addition to cameras and technology displays, this exhibition contained art style photos of American life. Many visitors wondered about what was not included in the photos. Finding no minorities in any of the photographs, one visitor asked “Where the hell are your blacks?”<sup>22</sup> This comment almost sounds argumentative as this visitor clearly wondered why the exhibition did not show the difficult parts of American society. The visitors to this exhibition appeared to believe that the truth must contain something unpleasant, and felt it their duty to remind the Americans that they could not be deceived. “Dear American Friends! Your exhibition is very nice. But I don’t understand the meaning of your pictures. I wanted to learn about American life, but I saw only American beauty, and that is lie. I don’t like your exhibition very well.”<sup>23</sup> This visitor to the photography exhibition believed the photographs shown in the exhibits to be staged because of their idyllic content. If something is beautiful and positive, then it cannot possibly be true, and therefore must be propaganda or capitalist lies. While it would be hard for anyone to credit such an exhibition with a truthful presentation of reality, the exhibitions were designed by the USIA purposefully to impress the Soviet visitors with luxury items, ostensibly to draw a mad rush of previously denied consumers wanting to throw off their communist shackles.<sup>24</sup> Rather than infiltrating most Soviet visitors with a frenzied desire for frying pans, the exhibit organizers created an unbelievable consumer paradise that most visitors did not credit as the truth.

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<sup>22</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>23</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7.

<sup>24</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 861.



According to the comments, the visitors felt that the guides often went out of their way to mislead them and to deny what they felt was the truth about American society. One visitor asked why there were no political photos and was told by a guide that "...the average American is not interested in politics..."<sup>25</sup> Based on the anti-war demonstrations and other forms of political activism that were occurring in America in the 1960s and 1970s, the images and other information about which were often shown on Soviet television and otherwise disseminated by Soviet propaganda, the visitors were convinced that Americans cared very much about politics at this time. The fact that the USIA chose not to show political photos of any type was very suspicious to the cautiously interested Soviet visitors. Comments like this show that the visitors were suspicious of buying into another government system that was lying to them. As a result, the communist beliefs of Soviet citizens were reinforced.

While America was anything but completely integrated in the 1960s and 1970s, as evidenced by the civil rights movement, Soviet citizens seemed to believe that many Americans were constantly fighting against government oppression. A visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma Ata commented, "We came to see the life of the common people, not debauchery. In the photographs are no black people: in the USSR all are on an equal level."<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, this was far from the truth. Indeed, the Soviet government did take measures to properly integrate and honor the multitude of different cultures and people in the Soviet Union, but this policy was

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<sup>25</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>26</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 6 and 7.

never a complete success because the government often mistrusted members of non-Russian nationalities as not completely reliable.<sup>27</sup>

Soviet propaganda led them to believe that racial discrimination was rampant in America and that no progress had ever been made in that sphere. One visitor to the Donetsk exhibition said “My overall impression of the exhibit is not a bad one. Only one thing surprises me, and that is why everyone denies racial discrimination (?)”<sup>28</sup> Jarobin Gilbert, Jr., a doctoral candidate in Slavic languages at Harvard University was the only black guide at an outdoor recreation exhibition in Ufa, a city in the Soviet Union, in 1973. He said that

They point to all these things and say, ‘you, as a black, can you buy this stuff?’ ... Their conception of the race problem in the United States, and I never deny that it is a major social problem, is 40 or 50 years out of date. The extent of the misinformation these people have really ticks me off sometimes. Some people give you the feeling they think America is run on slave labor, that not only no progress has been made in the last decade, or the last century for that matter, but that things are going backwards. Somebody has been lying to them, and the lies are big lies. It puts me in the funny position of being very simplistic in discussing race in America. You cannot get into any subtleties.<sup>29</sup>

Gilbert’s frank discussion of race with the exhibition visitors brought complaints from Soviet authorities, as this topic of conversation often brought up Soviet ethnic issues.<sup>30</sup> The experience of Gilbert shows that the Soviet government was well aware of its problems with malintegration, and that they did not wish for these strains to be brought up<sup>31</sup>. The beliefs Soviet citizens held

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870-1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 226.

<sup>28</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R., 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Parks, “Soviets Have No Idea What U.S. Life is Really All About,” *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Sept. 25, 1973.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Parks, “Soviets Have No Idea What U.S. Life is Really All About,” *Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Sept. 25, 1973.

<sup>31</sup> The agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union prohibited the discussion of these issues and other internal affairs of the host country.

about racial issues in American society clearly helped them maintain their belief that their own system was superior.

Many visitors also commented on economic as well as social differences. One visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma Ata wrote, “Your exhibit showed only the rich side of the world of capitalism; poverty and unemployment were not reflected.”<sup>32</sup> While not all the products shown were in the economic range of all American citizens, there was nothing preventing them from buying these items if they had money. This visitor clearly felt that under capitalism the majority of people lived in poverty and were unemployed or at least underemployed and then pretended to be surprised when it was not shown. This lack of information on the negative side of capitalism was only another reason to mistrust the cunning of American capitalists. The USIA clearly did not wish to show this negative side of America, but to the average Soviet visitor this appeared as dishonesty and government lies. This also clearly helped to reaffirm Soviet visitors’ commitment to their ideology.

Many comments show a desire among Soviet citizens to spread their communist ideas. They felt that America should learn from their example, and have a better and more equal society. To them, the propagandistic style of these exhibitions were a direct product of a society showing off items that none of them can actually own. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan commented, “The exhibit is superficial. It doesn’t hit on the most important life of the people and the exponents of the poor. I would like to see more and suggest that you follow our footsteps.”<sup>33</sup> Again, the visitors had trouble believing that positive aspects of

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<sup>32</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>33</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of

American society were the true. This time, however, the visitor suggested that America follow the example of the Soviet Union. This visitor felt that the system in the Soviet Union was far superior, and went as far as to say that America should adopt communism. Many visitors felt that their society was being insulted, or misunderstood. Like in Geertz's morale reaction, it appeared that some visitors felt that despite the problems in their society (which they typically did not mention in their comments) their system was right even if it was not understood by other societies, such as America. In a somewhat more aggressive comment from the Donetsk exhibition, a visitor said "Your exhibit was uninteresting, primitive, and one would wish to have seen much more. You're puppets on a string. You don't understand us at all...and to speak as friends? This book of impressions shouldn't be this way, it just underlines disrespect."<sup>34</sup> This visitor is clearly invested in his/her ideology and felt that the American consumers were controlled by the luxury items seen in the exhibition. He/she also seemed to view the guides as government stooges. The visitor goes so far as to refer to the positive comments in the book as disrespectful. By commenting on the content of the book as a whole, this visitor was participating in the unique public discourse created by the comment books. This discourse allowed the building of communist morale among Soviet visitors, creating a free space to criticize or praise what they were seeing and debate with their fellow citizens.

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Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>34</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

## Comment Books as a Public Discourse

The comment books became a space for public debate between Soviet visitors as well as a direct line to the American government. Reid says that “The comment books were an ‘American’ space, writing in which viewers clearly envisaged their addressee as the U.S. hosts, whether the exhibition organizers or the American people.”<sup>35</sup> Comment books were a traditional part of Soviet exhibitions, and many visitors used this space to thank the organizers of the exhibition. A visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma Ata wrote “We thank the administration and staff for a good photo demonstration and for good work.”<sup>36</sup> This comment reads as a simple thank you for the exhibition, without any criticism or specific compliments. It is possible that to some leaving the exhibition without expressing some form of gratitude for seeing the exhibition would be tantamount to a bad mannered gesture. Some comments contain a formal expression of gratitude alongside a substantial criticism. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk wrote “The exhibit is more a propaganda device, than an indicator of progress. But thank you for that.”<sup>37</sup> This comment sounds sarcastic, as the visitor thanked the Americans for their propaganda-heavy exhibition. On the other hand, this visitor could be attempting to stick to tradition and politely express gratitude regardless of their perception of the quality of the exhibition. This visitor also could have attempted to strike a

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<sup>35</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 873.

<sup>36</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>37</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

balance between admiration and skepticism, praising some of what they viewed in the exhibition, while trying to maintain objectivity.

In addition to being polite, visitors often had to consider who was watching them write in the book. Visitors wrote their comments in an open book, for all to see, including party officials. Reid writes "...[Writing] in comment books took place in public, with an awareness that other visitors, some of whom could turn out to be snoops, might be watching and could read them and identify the author."<sup>38</sup> Many comments lapsed into formal political language, praising détente and other government decisions. "America! Americans, frankly speaking, I had thought otherwise of you. Now I have learned that you are like we Soviet people and just like us, love peace, brotherhood and friendship among nations and peoples. Be our friends in every way."<sup>39</sup> This comment from the Kazan exhibition referenced and praised the cultural exchange. The commenter implied that his/her previous thoughts about America were negative, but now, thanks to both governments getting along, he/she wishes to know more about America. Other comments reference the détente favorably. A visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma Ata wrote "We are very glad that friendship between the American and Soviet people is strengthening...confirmation of this is your exhibit."<sup>40</sup> While these comments express favorable opinions concerning the policies of the Soviet government, it is possible that they were not a result of intimidation. The hopeful and positive tone of these comments may be related to the relief felt at the end of hostilities between the two countries.

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<sup>38</sup> Susan E. Reid, "Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 874.

<sup>39</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>40</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

In addition to worrying about who might be watching, visitors often had to consider who was reading what they had written. It was also common practice for visitors to read previous comments, and then tailor their response to match the former comments, creating an actual public discussion. This record of discourse proves that the opinions of the visitors were not always uniform, and that differing opinions were easily expressed in a public forum. For example, in the comment book from the research and development exhibition in Kazan one visitor writes “The exhibit is for savages. It’s been a long time since we were savages.” The comment directly underneath reads “Please excuse him, but he is a real savage.”<sup>41</sup> While one of the visitors sought to insult the exhibition by referring to it as backward, the second visitor apologized for the gracelessness of their fellow comrade. Some exchanges moved in the opposite direction, with one visitor writing a positive comment, and someone else commenting negatively in response. Two visitors to the same exhibition in Donetsk had such an exchange. “There are people who noticed only the irons and the coffeemakers at this exhibit. But they ‘couldn’t see the forest for the trees’.” The next comment reads, “But anyway the forest isn’t so impressive.”<sup>42</sup> The first visitor was responding to many previous comments negatively discussing the prevalence of domestic consumer items at the exhibition, pointing out to future visitors that they need to consider the exhibition as a whole and not concentrate on one part of it. The second visitor clearly did not find the exhibition as a whole to be better than its parts, or “the forest” to be better than “the trees.” The public discourse created by the comment books and the

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<sup>41</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>42</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

way that Soviet visitors treated them allowed a surprisingly wide range of opinions to be expressed.

In response to the cultural exchange exhibitions, Soviet citizens experienced a temporary upswing in their communist morale. While Soviet visitors were definitely interested in American society and culture, they did not necessarily believe that a capitalist way of life was the best choice for them. According to Reid, “The American model of freedom, progress, and prosperity, based on individual wealth and consumption, was not desirable for Soviet people if not accompanied by the core benefits and safety nets of socialism.”<sup>43</sup> The public discourse that developed within the comment books allowed visitors to explore their feelings concerning the content of the exhibitions, as well as their support of their political system. This support of their political system and convictions that it was right helped maintain the competition that was to come.

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<sup>43</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 901.



### CHAPTER 3: “SURPASSING FLEET-FOOTED AMERICA”: THE COMPETITIVE REACTION AND SOVIET CONSUMERISM

Competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was one of the driving forces behind the Cold War. Both countries time and time again tried to outdo each other in the fields of technology, athletics, the arms race, living standards, and many other aspects of society. As the years went on, the competition intensified as each side sought to outdo the other. The cultural exchange exhibitions played a role in this awareness by presenting American achievements in technology and culture. After their initial defensive reactions, many Soviet visitors to these exhibitions demonstrated a desire to compete with America, claiming that their technology was better or more advanced, that they were unsurprised by the exhibitions, or that they would soon surpass the technology and culture that was displayed.

Before and even after the exhibitions arrived, the Soviet Union placed emphasis on production processes, rather than the products of the processes. Historically, dating from 1928, the Soviet Union embarked on a series of separate Five Year Plans that were intended to produce a large amount of various products, and advance many different industries, with an emphasis on heavy industries and capital production. Despite the difficulties associated with these plans, they continued to be instituted time and time again. The exhibitions of American culture created an increased need for competition in the Soviet Union, and for tangible products that could compete with American ones.

Technological development was a major arena of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Each country sought to prove the superiority of their economic and political system through developing cutting edge technology. In what is commonly known as “The Space Race,” the United States and the Soviet Union battled to see who had the most

advanced space exploration program. The first man in space was Soviet citizen Yuri Gagarin, on April 12, 1961. On July 20, 1969 American astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon. While these were the largest technological milestones reached, both countries competed for smaller firsts as well, such as launching the first space station. Reaching technological firsts were seen by both countries as necessary to proving their ideological superiority.

In the Soviet Union, the production of consumer goods was underemphasized in favor of heavy industry. This heavy industry, or the “means of production,” was used to produce capital goods, such as grain or chemicals. This is not to say that consumer goods were not produced at all. By 1968, many items such as television sets, refrigerators, and vacuum cleaners were produced in large numbers. However, due to the rarity of spare parts and repair services, it is quite likely that many of them never functioned or quickly broke.<sup>1</sup> Although they were aware of this, the Soviet government was often unable to reorganize the economy properly to raise production quality to where it needed to be. These difficulties did little to deter the Soviet spirit of competition, and any doubts that they had about the production abilities of their country were cleverly hidden.

### Competition in the Comment Books

The comment books show that many Soviet visitors identified with their government when it came to competition with America in various spheres. Some comments even directly challenged America’s growing space program. One visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev wrote “I did not like your satellite; sputnik, our rocket, already reached the moon, and yours did

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<sup>1</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (2002): 228.

not fly yet high enough to reach the cosmos.”<sup>2</sup> Reminding the Americans of Soviet superiority concerning space technology, this visitor made the American space program seem completely useless, only producing a rocket that could not get out of the atmosphere. Another visitor to the exhibition in Kiev commented that “...In America one American wrote: The Russians should ride on donkeys, not cars; now I will tell Americans [that they] should drive cars, but not rockets.”<sup>3</sup> This comment states directly that the Americans were inferior in the space race, and should avoid driving rockets. In addition to being insulting, this comment reveals an inferiority complex. One comment from the plastics exhibition in Kiev specifically mentions one of the important people in the Space Race. “If this is all, what the USA can produce in the field of plastics, than it is no wonder that our Gagarin was first in the cosmos.”<sup>4</sup> Directly referencing the failure of the American space program to put a man in space first is an attempt at an insult, not only to the production of plastics, but to American technological superiority as well. A visitor to the Donetsk exhibition commented, “The Moon Rover model is poorly made, coarse and crude.”<sup>5</sup> Calling the moon rover, which may actually have been similar to the model that actually landed on the moon, “poorly made, coarse and crude” shows a competitive and possibly jealous state of mind. These types of insults and line of competitive thinking are what kept the technological race going.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>3</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9.

<sup>4</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9,

<sup>5</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

Based on the comment books, it is clear that Soviet visitors considered their country to have superior technology, or that is what they wished the Americans to believe. This often led them to be discourteous when commenting on the displays. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan said “It seems to me that this exhibit could have been put together in the early 60s”<sup>6</sup> Not only did this visitor believe that the technology exhibited was backward, he/she went as far as to suggest what was displayed was over ten years old. A visitor to the same exhibition in Donetsk wrote, “We lost a lot of time and saw nothing... You brought the same exhibits as in 1966. Is it possible that technical progress hasn’t grown in 6 years?”<sup>7</sup> This visitor further challenged American technological progress by literally dating the technology displayed. He/she implied that the Soviet Union experienced a large amount of technological progress during this time. Claiming that the progress of the Soviet Union was superior challenged America to produce something better and more advanced. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan stated “Your models have become obsolete before they go into production.”<sup>8</sup> The impudence in these comments could be interpreted in many different ways, depending on who wrote them. The visitors could have been attempting to be patriotic, compensating for perceived humiliation, or even hoping that Soviet officials might read their comment and notice their patriotism. The impoliteness itself, however, defies civilized behavior and shows how extreme the competition had become.

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<sup>6</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>7</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>8</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

Another visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev stated: “In my opinion the products shown at the exhibition became long ago obsolete in the Soviet Union. It would be desirable to see and to hear from the organizers of your exhibition something more new and better.”<sup>9</sup> Asking for something “newer and better” may be part of competing with America. Implying that everything on display is old makes Soviet technology sound newer. Not only is American technology backwards, but it appeared completely obsolete in comparison with the technology found in the Soviet Union. A visitor to the exhibition in Donetsk wrote “You exposed yesterday’s technology. Complete let down.”<sup>10</sup> This visitor makes sure to let the Americans know that they were disappointed by what they saw and that they expected more out of America. Another visitor to Donetsk commented “If America came to the Soviet Union to amaze people with the newest coffee makers and irons, then America has failed. Soviet technology is as good, if not better. In general, the exhibit is fair.”<sup>11</sup> This comment sounds both defensive and competitive. By implying that household technology is unimportant, they made America into a “failure.” Specifically referencing household items as unimportant implies that the exhibition is feminine in nature; this is clearly meant as an insult. The claim that the Soviet Union had technology that was just as good if not better appears to be responding to a perceived challenge in the exhibit. Despite apparently believing that the displayed technology was unimpressive, the visitor still felt that Soviet technology was on the same or a higher level. Why feel challenged if

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<sup>9</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Record of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>10</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>11</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

you are truly positive that you are superior? Not only is this defensive, but it proves the competitive spirit of Soviet visitors.

Many visitors felt that the specific technology displayed showed that American technology was unimpressive and already surpassed by that of the Soviets. This was mainly directed at the numerous household items on display in most of the exhibitions. Ever since the famous Kitchen Debate between Khrushchev and Nixon at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, the production and development of domestic consumer items was an integral part of competition between the two countries.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, Soviet visitors often did not consider household consumer items to be important. According to Reid, “The Soviet viewer wanted more emphasis on how things were produced, or how they worked, rather than on the finished products of consumption. Significantly, consumer durables, especially appliances for the home, were not counted as technology.”<sup>13</sup> A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk wrote “There are very few interesting things at the exhibit. I think it was a waste to bring the frying pans across the ocean. There is no research or development at the exhibit.”<sup>14</sup> The visitor made it sound as though frying pans were not a true example of research or development. He/she also implied that that was all the research and development America could come up with. Again, this visitor attempted to feminize America, and did not mean it as a compliment. A visitor to the same exhibition commented “I never thought irons and coffemakers were indicators of the

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<sup>12</sup> David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, “Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe,” in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 889.

<sup>14</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R., 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

level of development of a country.”<sup>15</sup> Household goods are not considered to be valuable to a society that emphasized heavy industry over consumer goods. A visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev wrote “To those who have at least some knowledge of plastics, the exhibition cannot be particularly interesting. Just on the level of housewives!”<sup>16</sup> In Soviet society at this time, women who did not work at all outside the home were seen as domestic parasites who contributed nothing of value to society at large. Claiming that the displayed technology was on the level of “housewives” was clearly meant to directly insult their opponent. Making domestic consumer items sound as though they do not matter masks the doubts that these visitors probably had about their own efforts at the production of these items.

As they did not consider household consumer items to be technology, many Soviet visitors expressed disappointment at what they considered to be a lack of technology on display. Instead of seeing highly technical displays which might inspire them, visitors were presented with model kitchens, cars and other mundane household durables. A visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev wrote, “We have expected more from this exhibition. Very few plastics used in technology are shown. One would like to see more new processings...”<sup>17</sup> Disappointment in the lack of technology was common at the plastics exhibition in Kiev. “Basically, the exhibition pleases the eye by its bright and warm colors; however, there are very few products applied in

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<sup>15</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>16</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>17</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9.

technology. I imagined that the USA has made greater progress in this field...”<sup>18</sup> Both comments expressed disappointment that the exhibition did not contain enough information on how America used plastics in their technology. The second visitor implies that while the displays are visually pleasing, there is little or nothing to learn from.

Confronted with what they felt was a dearth of technical information, many visitors apparently attempted to get a competitive edge by discussing the items on display with the guides. The guides were not typically technical specialists; they were usually linguists with little to no technical knowledge. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk wrote, “The exhibit bears no relation to its title. And the guides are so completely incompetent concerning technical questions that it’s hard to understand what they’re supposed to be.”<sup>19</sup> This visitor made it clear that he/she had seen anything new or cutting edge in the exhibition, and found the guides unable to answer their technical questions. “Amazing that the guides can’t even explain things as well as our amateurs!”<sup>20</sup> This visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan claimed that the American guides, who were representing their country, were well behind even the most untrained Soviet citizen. If the Americans could not even explain what they were displaying, then the Soviets had the advantage anyways.

Some visitors seemed disappointed that the technology was not solely American, and used this as a point of technological competition. A visitor to the photography exhibition in Alma

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<sup>18</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>19</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>20</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).



Ata wrote, “The exhibit did not create a deep impression, since it does not illustrate the technical side of composition. After all, the work is American, but the cameras are Japanese, Swedish, etc.”<sup>21</sup> This comment emphasizes the importance of the technology of taking photographs over the artistic value. The visitor implied that Soviet photographers use Soviet camera to take their pictures, and are therefore involved in the entire photographic process; it is entirely Soviet. Following this logic, how can Americans present pictures that were not taken with their technology? Are they not advanced enough to make their own cameras? Having their own technology and being more advanced than their competitors was extremely important to the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, economic autarchy was considered the norm, and using goods produced outside of the country was seen as detrimental to economic prowess. While this was part of economic Stalinism, it is clear that those ideas were still in circulation.

Many visitors compared the exhibitions they were seeing to those of their own country. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk commented “Much noise about nothing. He who has been to BDHX [VDNKh] will find nothing to do here.”<sup>22</sup> This comment directly refers to a specific and permanent Soviet exhibit. First opened in 1939 in Moscow as the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, it was extensively renovated and renamed Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (ВДХХ/ВДНKh) in 1959. Originally containing pavilions representing individual republics, under Khrushchev they became devoted to sectors of the economy, such as metallurgy, medicine, coal mining, and transportation. Over the years, the exhibition continued to be renovated and extended. The VDNKh was immensely popular,

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<sup>21</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Photography U.S.A. Exhibition, Alma Ata, U.S.S.R, 10/6-10/18/1976*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 6 and 7 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>22</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

receiving thousands of guests every year. In its final years, the two hundred and thirty-eight hectare park contained seventy-two pavilions, ranging from the Atomic Energy Pavilion to the Pavilion of Large Horned Livestock.<sup>23</sup> Based on how large the park had become by 1989, it can be imagined that a visitor in the 1972 might encounter something much larger and more impressive than what constituted the “Research and Development U.S.A” exhibition. Comparing exhibitions shows a desire to compete even over how achievements are presented.

Saying that they were not surprised by what they saw at the exhibitions helped Soviet citizens appear as though they were more technologically advanced and constantly aware of what was going on in America. A visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev commented “I failed to understand; what did you want to show with this exhibition (?) My advice is: go to our exhibition in Moscow, and you will see more. Don’t try to surprise us with that which is no surprise.”<sup>24</sup> This comment refers back to VDNKh, simultaneously claiming that there was more to see at the Soviet exhibit and that what was in the American exhibit was not new at all. Soviet visitors clearly believed that the exhibition would surprise them with items that were new and unusual to them, and felt that that goal was not achieved. Claiming to have unfulfilled high expectations shows a competitive spirit.

Some comments acknowledged a current lack of advanced technology in their country, but claimed that they would soon have everything that they were seeing, and more. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk wrote “...But, we are convinced that in a few years we’ll be better than you. Not only will we catch up with you but will also surpass your

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Forrest and Juliet Johnson, “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet national Identity in Moscow,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 3 (2002): 535.

<sup>24</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

country. We shall prove the superiority of the Soviet system.”<sup>25</sup> This comment implied that the visitor knew that the Soviet Union did not currently have the items on display. However, they believed that the Soviet system will succeed, and that they will have the consumer items on display, plus extra more advanced items. Using words such as “superiority” and “surpass” implied a sense of competition, as though the visitors are challenging America to a contest. These words also implied that the commenter believed in the rhetoric of Soviet propaganda. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan wrote “We hope to catch up with and surpass ‘fleet-footed’ America.”<sup>26</sup> This comment is very interesting because of the language used. The use of the word “fleet-footed” implies that America was advancing quickly. Suggesting that the Soviet Union will eventually “surpass” the quickly advancing America implies a challenge for the Soviet citizens. It will be harder to do, if there was a doubt in this visitor’s mind that it could be achieved, he/she attempted to hide it behind overconfidence. A visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev commented “We are lagging very much behind in the application of plastics in everyday life, but we will catch up.”<sup>27</sup> The amount of confidence expressed in this comment implies that the visitor was positive that their country will have all that they are seeing and more. This comment is also provocative, as though the commenter wished to spark more competition between the two countries by threatening to “catch up.” These

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<sup>25</sup>Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>26</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>27</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

confident comments could also mask a certain amount of doubt concerning their ability to achieve their goals.

Competition was an important part of defining the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the character of the Cold War itself. Technological development became the largest arena for competition, with both countries attempting to reach technological firsts before the other. Calling American technology obsolete and insulting their progress revealed a competitive spirit among Soviet visitors to the exhibitions. Even though some visitors admitted that the Soviet Union was behind America in terms of technology, they challenged their rivals by claiming to eventually surpass them and prove the superiority of their political system. The pervasive use of insulting comments may have allowed the visitors a chance to hide their own doubts, as well as provoke competition with America. The abrasiveness and hostility of many of the comments, however, did not alter the effect that the cultural exchange exhibitions had on consumerism in the Soviet Union.

#### Soviet Citizens and the Celebration of American Consumerism

The cultural exchange exhibitions had an important effect on how Soviet society viewed consumerism. The many Soviet visitors that attended the cultural exchange exhibitions were presented with cutting edge domestic technology such as washing machines, televisions, vacuum cleaners, and high quality cars. While the reactions of Soviet visitors to American consumer items were both positive and negative, it is clear that the majority of visitors felt entitled to and a longing for the American goods on display. These consumer desires show the ultimate failure of the Soviet government to control or satisfy its' citizens' consumer desires.

Consumerism was not a new phenomenon in the Soviet Union by the 1960s. It had begun to develop under Stalin in the 1930s. In the mid-1930s, Stalin took a stand against the austere concepts of revolutionary asceticism, pioneering the slogan “Life Has Become More Joyous.” Depictions of abundant food and copious amounts of consumer goods were printed in the Soviet newspapers and posters to raise the people’s hopes for the future, but instead often accentuated the awareness of their own poverty on the part of most citizens.<sup>28</sup> Almost none of the luxury items shown were for sale in state stores, with the exception of model stores in Moscow, where they were outside the reach of the average citizen. According to historian David Hoffmann, the visibility of these luxury goods had a specific purpose. “The presence and publicity of these goods, then, was to create an image of plenty and an incentive for Soviet workers to work harder in the hope that they might one day be able to acquire such items.”<sup>29</sup> High quality luxury consumer goods available to all became a dream to strive for.

In the 1930s, the Soviet government was not ready to abandon their emphasis on heavy industry as a way to provide more consumer goods to the citizenry. Still, they adopted a series of measures to increase availability of consumer goods. For example, in early 1935, the government ended bread rationing and over 13,000 new bread stores were built, bread deliveries were increased and store hours were expanded.<sup>30</sup> To improve trade practices, Soviet leaders ordered the examination of Western retail services. Between 1935 and 1937, several trade officials were sent to the United States to examine American trade practices, such as department stores. These

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<sup>28</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 127.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffmann, 128.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

officials were clearly impressed, endorsing American trade methods, with only slight reservations expressed as to the dangers of capitalist consumption.<sup>31</sup>

As positive as this plan sounded, it proved to be less than a complete success. A trade census taken in 1935 revealed that most stores were poorly stocked and underfunded as a lack of money led the government to only create model stores in Moscow and other big cities. Again, these model stores contained overpriced items that only elites could afford.<sup>32</sup> While the plan was smart, the government never seemed to be able to part with enough money to make it really successful.

The government often seemed to believe that rationalization, efficiency, and hard work would solve problems created by a lack of government funds and shortages of consumer goods. In this system, salespeople were expected to gather information about the preferences of their customers, and report back to their managers and producers. This information would be used to connect supply with demand. The best salespeople often had to bargain with other shopkeepers to provide their customers with rare items, or modify what they had to please customers.

In the post-war period, Soviet consumer taste became more decorative and feminine, as material culture became more important. Vera Dunham writes “Material craving engulfed postwar society from top to bottom. Coiffures, cosmetics, perfume, clothes – the trappings of enhanced femininity – gained social significance. They, too, began to represent the new public good.”<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on decorative consumer culture even influenced the reconstruction of Moscow. New residential complexes were constructed in good neighborhoods. According to Dunham, “Elevators smelled of fresh enamel. Parquet floors were heavily waxed. Electric

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<sup>31</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 133.

<sup>32</sup> Hoffmann, 133.

<sup>33</sup> Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 43.

garbage disposal units were built into kitchen sinks. The hall lights were made in the shape of lilies. The deliberate descriptions of prosperity offered escape from the piercing lament over the tragedy of war.”<sup>34</sup> Private house and car ownership became more common in the post-war era as well. Using and owning a car for shopping or family outings was not considered negative; doing so with a government car, however, was not appropriate. Dunham even suggests that home owning was so common that it was only a status symbol in relatively low social spheres. Even though private property ownership was long considered taboo, post-war Soviet society saw those values as part of the past. Dunham claims that “‘Then’ was the period, before and after the revolution, when homeowners were the enemies of the proletariat. ‘Now,’ however, the best working people aspire deservedly to homeownership themselves.”<sup>35</sup> This new decorative and material consumer culture helped Soviet society escape from the devastation caused by World War II. It also began to change appetites concerning consumerism, as Soviet citizens began to feel more entitled to consumer items and private property.

Soviet consumerism changed after Stalin as well. Despite a growing desire for consumer items, the Soviet government still expected their citizens to approach consumerism rationally and from a communist perspective. Only in the late 1950s did consumption become a mass entitlement and mass production of consumer items became a priority in the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> Even so, the Soviet citizen was expected to be a “rational consumer” rather than an insatiable capitalist consumer. To be a “rational consumer” one had to consider their own needs in the context of what was best for society as a whole. How people lived and their habits of consuming became part of public discourse as the government began to moderate it under Khrushchev.

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<sup>34</sup> Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 46.

<sup>35</sup> Dunham, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 895.

Popular advice literature in magazines and newspapers discussed home decoration tactics and taste, which tended to be austere and restrained.<sup>37</sup> According to Reid, “The Soviet person was supposed to be guided by higher reason. S/he could only meet with incomprehension a mode of consumerism driven by constantly escalating wants rather than real need.”<sup>38</sup> The expected rational consumer response of Soviet visitors was designed to show their devotion to their particular system. Desiring the items on display was fine, but actually purchasing or owning them needed to be done in a rational way.

When discussing the Soviet consumer economy, it is important to use the term “desire” rather than “demand”. According to historian Lewis Siegelbaum, “Desire...is a more appropriate term than demand, because as an independent variable, demand had little purchase in Soviet political economy. Desire, rather than demand, was what lay beyond the party’s ‘rational’ determination of needs.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore desire was a force to be directed and controlled by the government.

In some situations, the Soviet government attempted to fulfill consumer desires in ways that were more consistent with the morals of the Soviet system. An example of this is the policies concerning cars. Renting cars instead of individual ownership of cars was seen as healthier for society, as the cars were available for all to use. If a citizen needed a car, he/she could obtain one, but if he/she did not need the car for a specific reason, it would be available for others who needed it more. In 1959, government-owned cars became available for rent by citizens who wished to travel outside the limits of public transportation. These cars came without drivers, so

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<sup>37</sup> David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, “Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe,” in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 895.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 223.



the renters had to pass a driving and car repair test. But after passing, they could rent the car for a few hours, or even a month.<sup>40</sup>

Although this system appeared to be the perfect solution, it was far from it, since as usual there were not enough cars to satiate the demand. Qualified renters often had to sleep outside the rental offices to obtain a car, when there were no cars available for rent. Cars were approved for rent when they had serious mechanical issues, while other cars with relatively minor problems were unavailable for weeks. Most of the cars available were very old, and stored without any protection from the weather.<sup>41</sup> Due to a shoddy system, rental cars did not properly satisfy the desire among Soviet citizens for the automobile.

In order to escape from the flawed rental car system, Soviet citizens had to purchase their own automobile. New cars were extremely expensive. By the late 1970s, car purchasers reported that it took eight years to save up enough money to buy a new car.<sup>42</sup> Cars were seen as personal property, or as only belonging to one person instead of society as a whole. As a result, many citizens resented car owners. As a result, according to Siegelbaum, the government waged a propaganda campaign to increase popular acceptance of those fortunate enough to have acquired cars.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike cars, household items were not seen in a negative light, and the government produced more of these in earnest. But, in order to produce more consumer goods to satisfy consumer desires, the Soviet government had to make changes to its economy. Despite having publicly committed to increase the delivery of consumer items, the government failed to live up to the expectations generated by its own rhetoric. Transitioning from producing primarily capital

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<sup>40</sup> Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 225.

<sup>41</sup> Siegelbaum, 226.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

goods to consumer goods did not come easily to the Soviet Union. For example, the Ninth Five Year Plan (1971-1975) projected a slightly higher increase in the output of consumer products rather than of capital goods, but these goals were not reached. According to historian Robert Service,

Watches, furniture, and radios were at last meant to be manufactured in abundance. Yet the Plan still left the predominant bulk of investment at the disposal of capital-goods production. And in practice the economic ministries and the rest of the party-police-military-industrial complex managed to prevent the Plan's consumer-oriented investment projects from being fully realized. By 1975, for example, consumer goods had expanded at a rate nine percent slower than capital goods.<sup>44</sup>

Another persistent problem was the less than adequate quality of the products. Spare parts were rare, and few people were qualified to fix refrigerators or cars.<sup>45</sup>

The Soviet government sought to control consumer desires and keep them simple and restrained. This would give the government all the time it needed to actually catch up to their American competitors. "The people's taste had to be disciplined both on ideological and aesthetic grounds, as well as to keep aspirations within limits state industrial production might feasibly satisfy... In this respect, the discourse surrounding consumption during the Thaw period can be regarded as an important part of efforts to relegitimize and rejuvenate the communist project."<sup>46</sup> The Soviet government believed that if they could legitimately compete with the West without compromising the integrity of their system, then they would be able to prove the legitimacy of their system to the world.

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 407.

<sup>45</sup> Susan E. Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (2002): 228.

<sup>46</sup> David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, "Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe," in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 14.

Analysis of the comment books sheds new and valuable light on Soviet consumer tastes and desires. To begin with, it is clear that Soviet citizens were not unfamiliar with luxury consumer items. They had been on public display for decades as a future reward for hard work. A lack of funding and shortages kept many of these items as status symbols for the elites. Carefully designed plans and the ingenuity of salespeople could not make up for a lack of both consumer items and the funds to properly distribute them. Even though the expected standard of living went up in the post-war period, the government still attempted to regulate desire and taste and therefore distract its citizens from the gaping holes in the system. While most appeared to support their system, many visitors appeared to be tempted by the items on display. The strain between ideology and desire can be seen in the comment books from the cultural exchange exhibitions, especially in the comments discussing cars and household consumer items.

Among the most popular items displayed at the cultural exchange exhibitions were the automobiles. Almost every exhibition had at least one, and Soviet visitors often flocked around them for hours. At the research and development exhibition in 1972, which contained a Lincoln Continental, among other vehicles, it was reported that “The automobiles were the biggest hit, and most of their attachments and accessories, such as mirrors and emblems, were taken as souvenirs by exhibit visitors.”<sup>47</sup> Many visitors expressed a desire to own the cars on display. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan wrote “We especially liked your cars. I would like to have them on our roads.”<sup>48</sup> Rumors that visitors could win the cars on display circulated widely, especially at the research and development exhibition in Donetsk. “My

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Parks, “Russians Boggle at U.S. Goods, and Marylander’s Story,” *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Mar. 4, 1973.

<sup>48</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

son especially liked the automobile, Ford, and he would very much like to be the millionth visitor in order to receive a car.”<sup>49</sup> Several more visitors to the exhibition expressed a desire to be the millionth visitor to win one of the cars on display. This rumor (which was completely untrue) is interesting because it meant that anyone could receive a car, regardless of status or wealth. The fact that this rumor was apparently wanton suggests that the Soviet government’s attempt to transform Soviet citizens into “rational” consumers was a failure.

Upon seeing the cars in the exhibitions, the Soviet visitors must have been reminded of their own automobile industry. Cars were not new in the Soviet Union, but they were of lower quality and had a more modest appearance than the automobiles displayed in the American exhibitions. Some reacted defensively. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk wrote, “Your cars, indisputably, are good, but our ‘Volga’ is better. But still I wouldn’t mind being the millionth visitor of your exhibit...”<sup>50</sup> This visitor initially felt the need to claim that cars made in the Soviet Union are better, but then immediately admitted his/her desire to win one of the American cars.

American household consumer items solicited many different reactions among Soviet visitors. Most visitors reacted competitively, claiming that they had all the consumer items on display. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Kazan commented, “The household products as demonstrated are necessary for human life. Everyday American life is revealed very little.”<sup>51</sup> By claiming that the household items displayed were “necessary for

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<sup>49</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>50</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1.

<sup>51</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Kazan, U.S.S.R, 7/17-8/17/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of

human life,” this visitor implied that everything shown was widely available in the Soviet Union. Where are the items that make American life so special and superior? This visitor attempted to prove that he/she was not a backward consumer, amazed by the absolute essentials. A visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev wrote,

Did the organizers of this exhibition know that in the Soviet Union all this is in the passed stage, namely, we have all the things I saw here, and you cannot surprise a Soviet citizen [?] We have absolutely all of this. And our things, I believe, are much cheaper. In our store on Kreshchatik-Krasnoarmeyskaya Street the things are much finer and cheaper. Furs are demonstrated here. But we already have very original fur coats hanging in our store...<sup>52</sup>

Not only did this visitor state that all the items displayed were available in the Soviet Union, but that their items were cheaper, higher quality, and available to all. Based on the mention of a specific store, this visitor may even have been a store owner, which would explain why he/she had such a strongly defensive reaction. This comment is also competitive. He/she claims that the same or better items are available for less money than in America; why is this so if America is so superior? Did they not have the same production power? Some visitors were simply negative concerning household goods and consumer items. A visitor to the research and development exhibition in Donetsk wrote, “The exhibit is useful for the realization of cultural relations between our countries, but many of the displays are of no particular interest, in particular, some of the computers (and) household appliances (electric toothbrushes, etc.). They are impressive in appearance but of no practical value.”<sup>53</sup> While making sure to not insult the cultural exchange,

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Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>52</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>53</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Research and Development Exhibition, Donetsk, U.S.S.R, 9/14-10/15/1972*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 1 (National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

this visitor claimed to have found the displayed consumer items to be completely impractical and uninteresting. This could be related to the Soviet belief that household items were not considered technology, and therefore not practical. However, it is possible that this visitor was more interested in the items than he/she claimed to be. He/she mentioned specific items. If they were so uninteresting, why did he/she remember them specifically? Even more revealing is when the visitor claimed that the items were impressive in appearance but of no practical value, and therefore uninteresting. This seems to be a direct repetition of the government's active attempts to control taste. Like many comments, it is impossible to tell if this was the honest opinion of the writer, or if it was written for other observers.

Not all reactions to displays of consumer goods were negative or defensive. Some visitors expressed a strong desire to own the items on display, and have them available in the Soviet Union. As basic consumer goods were not new in the Soviet Union by the 1960s and 1970s, the comment books show a notable interest in luxury consumer goods, especially the one from the plastics exhibition in Kiev. The plastics exhibition in Kiev in 1961 contained a large number of consumer goods, such as plastic packaging displays, toys, a plastic sports car, and a speed boat.<sup>54</sup> A visitor wrote "We liked the exhibition very much. Particularly we liked the use of plastics in everyday life. Our wish: the hair dryers should be exported to the Soviet Union. It is a very necessary thing."<sup>55</sup> This comment implies that Soviet visitors desired specialty consumer goods, as hair dryers are hardly necessary for subsistence living.

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<sup>54</sup> George Schreiber, "Plastics U.S.A a 'Smash Hit' in Three Soviet Union Cities," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Nov. 5, 1961.

<sup>55</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, "Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria," Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

In a stark contrast to many negative comments, some visitors felt that the items on display needed to be sold in the Soviet Union. While this line of thinking was not typical among many comment books from exhibitions in the Soviet Union, it was prevalent at the plastics exhibition in Kiev. A visitor to the plastics exhibition in Kiev wrote “It is necessary that the goods, particularly household appliances (refrigerators, television sets), be sold in the USSR.”<sup>56</sup> Many comments show that some visitors may have wondered why their government did not allow them access to specific consumer items. Another visitor to the Kiev exhibition commented “...Marvelous is the boat ‘Mustanga-14.’ You should produce more of them and sell them to us, nobody will be harmed by that...”<sup>57</sup> This comment is interesting because the visitor suggested that the boat should be sold in the Soviet Union, because “nobody will be harmed by that.” By wondering why a boat would be harmful to society, this visitor was criticizing the Soviet trade restrictions. This visitor was not alone in his/her dislike of the trade restrictions. Another visitor to Kiev wrote, “The exhibition is very interesting...certain good things should be taken for production in our country.”<sup>58</sup> This visitor stressed that “certain good things” should be available in the Soviet Union. This comment suggested that not all American consumer items were harmful to society, and that trade restrictions should be amended. This critical behavior shows the strong effect the example of American consumerism had on Soviet visitors. Desiring the items on display led many to criticize the choices of their own government.

The comment books show that Soviet visitors were of two minds concerning American consumer items. Some reacted defensively, while many clearly coveted the items on display.

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<sup>56</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, Records of the United States Information Agency, Office of Exhibits, Record Group 306, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9(National Archives and Records Administration II: College Park, MD).

<sup>57</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9.

<sup>58</sup> Translated Comment Book, *Plastics-U.S.A Exhibition, Kiev, U.S.S.R, 5/22/-6/13/1961*, “Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to U.S. Exhibits in the U.S.S.R, Rumania, and Bulgaria,” Box 9.

However, the presence of positive reactions to consumer goods and even envious fascination with them shows the ultimate failure of the Soviet government to cultivate “rational consumers” and control taste and desire. In particular, the longing expressed by Soviet visitors to own American cars shows the spread of feelings of entitlement for goods that their own government failed to provide them. The untrue and unsolicited rumor that claimed that the one millionth visitor would win a car truly exemplifies the manifestation of the Soviet government’s biggest fear; uncontrolled, irrational, and subconscious craving for consumer items. Consumerism and entitlement were two points in which Soviet visitors were more in touch with American popular culture than the values dictated to them by their own government.



## CONCLUSION

The reactions of Soviet and Eastern European visitors to the cultural exchange exhibitions can be seen in three ways. Responding to a perceived challenge to their country, many Soviet visitors became defensive of their society and way of life. Claiming that their way of life was just as good as that of Americans helped them deny the strain caused by the exhibitions. This defensive attitude, however, did not dull the lingering interest that Soviet citizens had for all things American. This interest was not always cautious, as some Soviet citizens were not threatened or challenged by what they saw in the exhibitions and reacted positively. Many of the Eastern Europeans responded positively, expressing a desire to practice American habits and obtain the goods on display.

This defensiveness led many Soviets to publicly support their country against the insults of outsiders. Turning to their ideology to escape the stress of strain was a natural reaction in a society where ideology was very important. The comment books illustrate how many Soviet visitors experienced an upswing in communist morale. These visitors used their ideology to point out flaws in and negative consequences of the American capitalist system. According to these visitors, if the items on display came with social inequality, racism, and wars like Vietnam, they were happier in the Soviet Union. Much of the public discourse created by the comment books praises the decisions of their government, therefore expressing their communist morale. The public nature of the comment books and the way they were treated by visitors led to an interesting and revealing public discussion of America on display.

The renewal of communist morale created a desire among some Soviets to prove that their political system was superior, which led directly to competitive feelings. Dissecting and criticizing American society and policy choices proved that America was not what it pretended

to be, but it did not prove without a doubt that the Soviet system was superior. Technological competition between the governments of America and the Soviet Union only spurred on these competitive feelings. Many visitors expressed a desire to not only catch up with, but to surpass America in terms of technological development. Having what was on display became important to many of the Soviet visitors, not as frenzied consumers, but as patriots who wanted to beat America at its own game.

However, it cannot be said that the desire for the items on display did not affect Soviet consumerism. The history of consumerism in the Soviet Union shows that they were no strangers to consumer items, but were typically not able to create a properly functioning system. As the demand for domestic consumer items grew, the Soviet government attempted to influence and control taste. According to the Soviet leaders, influencing taste would allow the government to control demand and in this way avoid excessive strain on the Soviet consumer economy. As “rational consumers,” Soviet citizens were expected to consider what was best for the country as a whole as well as themselves. The government also provided communist friendly alternatives to satisfy desires, but these alternatives were often less than successful. While the comment books show both negative and positive responses to consumer items, the majority of Soviet visitors expressed a longing for the items on display. This longing and a sense of entitlement shows the ultimate failure of the Soviet government to influence the consumer values of their citizens.

At the beginning of this study, the motives of both America and the Soviet Union when entering into the Cultural Exchange Agreement were considered. Did these reactions prove either side to be successful in achieving their goals? The answer to this question is quite complicated, and probably cannot be entirely answered here. The reactions of Soviet and Eastern European visitors were more complicated than the American government realized.

The American government entered into the Cultural Exchange Agreement intending to bring down communism through cultural infiltration. They felt that the lure of luxury consumer items would be so great that Soviet citizens would no longer feel any loyalty to their government or ideology, and gladly accept capitalism. As demonstrated by the general upswing in communist morale, the flashy and opulent displays created by the USIA failed to instantly create Soviet capitalists. Even though there was not instantaneous reaction, it would be false to say that American cultural infiltration was a complete failure. By the 1970s, American popular culture was immensely popular in the Soviet Union, especially among young people, so much so that the government was unable to censor it or completely control it. As previously discussed, consumerism also changed as many began to expect more household consumer items. While it would be not entirely correct to imply that cultural infiltration was why the Soviet Union came to an end, it probably did not help it stay together.

If America did not accomplish its objectives with the signing of the Cultural Exchange Agreement, then did the Soviet Union? According to Susan Reid, the Soviet government allowed these exhibitions because they hoped to use the items on display as a technological blueprint to further their own technological progress. This does not appear to have been the case. The government believed in the obvious correctness of their system and therefore they considered the risk of ideological contamination to be very low. The upswing of morale proves that the government's trust was mostly well placed.

As far as using the displays as technological blueprints, the results were mixed. Competition characterized the Cold War, and as technology became to characterize modernity, possessing cutting edge innovation became very important. However, based on the comment books themselves, it is likely that little was taken in terms of technological developments from

these exhibitions. The displays had little in the way of detailed technological information, catering mostly to domestic consumer items. The Soviet government also wanted its citizens to attend the exhibitions to see what they would own in the future. Despite their efforts to compete, the Soviet Union never had the amount of advanced consumer items that America did.

The Soviet Union was a country of many different ethnicities, languages, and world view points. This is illustrated in this study through the wide range of opinions expressed by the visitors to the cultural exchange exhibitions. The relationship between the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the world was incredibly complex, as illustrated by the comment books from the cultural exchange exhibitions.

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