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Review by **Anthony Swift**, University of Essex

In 1958, American president Dwight Eisenhower and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev signed a pathbreaking agreement to facilitate cultural and academic exchanges between the two superpowers. An American National Exhibition arrived at Moscow's Sokolniki Park in 1959, where Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev had their famous 'kitchen debate', so called because one of the settings where it took place was the kitchen of a model American home. The Soviets held their own national exhibition in New York City's Coliseum the same year. There followed a "cultural Cold War," in which the weapons in the battle for hearts and minds included ballet troupes, symphony orchestras, works of art, and exhibitions of products from each country. Van Cliburn won the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in 1958, the Bolshoi Ballet made its first tour of the United States in 1959, while the American Ballet Theatre visited the Soviet Union in 1962. After the 1959 American National Exhibition, the United States Information Agency (USIA) organized some eighteen traveling thematic exhibitions, each of which focused on some aspect of American life, such as medicine, education, industrial design, etc. These exhibitions aimed to counter Soviet claims about the superiority of socialism by showing ordinary Soviet citizens an alternative image of the United State, one that emphasized the plethora of consumer goods that capitalism made available to Americans. The first was held in 1961; the last, in 1991. The Soviets also sent exhibitions to tour the United States.

Since the Cold War came to an end, the cultural competition it fostered has increasingly attracted the attention of historians and museum curators.¹ Most of the work to date deals

¹ Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War*

primarily with American efforts, but in 2008 London's Victoria and Albert Museum put together a splendid exhibition, "Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970," which examined how each side sought to use design, art, and architecture to proclaim its superiority.² One of the debates that has emerged in the scholarship is over the issue of "who won", with some scholars arguing that these cultural exchanges encouraged reform in the U.S.S.R, hastened the end of the Cold War, and even contributed to the Soviet collapse.³ David Caute, focusing largely on high culture, has argued that the West won the cultural Cold War due to the greater freedom it permitted artists to exercise their creativity, in contrast to the Soviet Union's repressive conformity, while Frances Stonor Saunders has documented the C.I.A.'s role in promoting artists and authors as part of its cultural offensive.⁴ Another debate involves the impact of American cultural propaganda on the Soviet population. While most scholars, relying largely on American official sources, argue that by exposing Soviet citizens to the American way of life with its tempting consumer goods the USIA exhibitions contributed to the growing dissatisfaction with the Soviet system, Susan Reid's work on Soviet visitors' reactions to the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow leads her to conclude that attitudes were more ambivalent.⁵

Thus far, the 1959 Moscow exhibition has gotten the lion's share of attention. In "Cold War 'Bridge-Building,'" Tomas Tolvaisas makes an important contribution to our understanding of the effects of the American exhibitions by focusing on "the growing extent and significance of unique interpersonal contacts that accompanied the nine USIA exhibitions in the Soviet Union after 1959" (4). Each exhibition was accompanied by twenty to thirty Russian-speaking guides recruited from American university students. The guides became an attraction in themselves, for they offered Soviet visitors the opportunity to learn first-hand about life in the United States. Tolvaisas breaks new ground in using the recollections of the American guides to analyse how their interactions with Soviet visitors can reveal the impact of the exhibitions, using archival evidence as well as his own interviews and correspondence with former guides.

The exhibitions aimed to educate Soviet visitors about various aspects of American life. The exhibitions minimized the display of "flashy consumer products" and instead focused on

Confrontation: U.S. Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 2008).

² David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2008).

³ See, for example, Hixson, 211-213.

⁴ David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

⁵ 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* 9:4 (Fall 2008): 855-904.

living and working conditions and scientific and technical progress (9). The role of the guides was vitally important at the exhibitions, for they discussed the exhibits with visitors and answered questions about life in the United States. They also had to deal with “hecklers,” professional Soviet agitators who questioned the veracity of the exhibits and tried to disrupt conversations between guides and visitors. The guides received several weeks of training in preparation for their work. They were instructed on fielding questions, responding to hecklers, and demonstrating the devices on display, but were “encouraged to speak their mind and express personal opinions during their interactions with Soviet citizens” (10). The USIA wanted the guides to acknowledge American domestic problems such as racial discrimination but at the same time to draw attention to the progress that was being made.

In order to demonstrate the diversity of the United States, the guides were selected from Americans of different ethnic backgrounds and from different regions. The work was exhausting, for the guides had to answer the same questions in Russian for hours each day. Sometimes they met with Soviet citizens privately in their homes, parks, or restaurants for more informal discussions. Tolvaisas argues that the USIA guides “promoted Soviet popular goodwill” by demonstrating “their open-minded attitude toward the United States, including the ability to be critical of the U.S. government and its policies” (15). Specialists in various fields also accompanied the exhibitions to answer technical questions that the guides were not equipped to handle and to give lectures and demonstrations.

Official Soviet responses to the exhibitions were largely but not always hostile. Sometimes officials demanded the removal of exhibits or organized campaigns critical of the American exhibitions. Soviet authorities staged competing exhibitions, refused to publish information about the dates and locations of the American exhibitions, used the police to harass visitors, and on occasion attempted to sexually entrap guides. The press often criticized the displays for failing to show the latest American technological achievements. Yet at the same time the Soviet authorities showed interest in and even offered to purchase some displays, including plastics, automobiles, space suits, hand tools, and toys, a positive attitude that reflected the Soviet Union’s keen interest in learning about and acquiring American technology.

The most interesting section of Tolvaisas’s article concerns the Soviet visitors’ reaction to the American exhibitions, which were tremendously popular and drew crowds of hundreds of thousands. The USIA believed that the exhibitions were a kind of neutral territory, where ordinary Soviet citizens and well as specialists felt relatively free to interact with Americans. Soviet experts were eager to inspect the exhibits and the literature that accompanied them, and at times expressed their admiration for the advancements in American technology on display. According to Tolvaisas, who bases his assessment on remarks in the comment books and the guides’ reports, “the general population was deeply impressed by U.S. consumer goods, invariably admiring their color, shape, weight, durability, and multiple applications” (24). Many visitors wanted to purchase objects on display, but an exchange agreement prohibited the sale of any goods. Visitors plied the guides with questions about American life, especially living standards – the prices of goods and housing, the cost of education and health care, and wages. They also expressed a keen

interest in the guides themselves – their lifestyles, jobs, earnings, education, social and ethnic origins, etc. Some visitors asked questions about U.S. foreign policy, and the war in Vietnam was a common topic of discussion with the guides. The subject of race relations in the United States was another frequent topic of interest. Visitors were envious of Americans' freedom to travel and to choose what to study at universities, but sometimes saw American society as too individualistic. Soviet citizens showed little understanding of American democracy and had little interest in American political rights, free enterprise, or capitalism. Visitors often had excessive expectations of seeing miracles at the exhibitions and expressed disappointment when they did not. According to Tolvaisas, the Soviets public's questions and comments "revealed their low standard of living, their relative isolation, and the substantial influence of Soviet propaganda" – hardly a surprise (29). But he also argues that visitors' comments indicated their distrust of official Soviet sources of information about life in the United States and "an overwhelming desire for alternative sources of information" and support for further U.S.-Soviet exchanges to reduce the danger of armed conflict between the two superpowers (29-30).

In his conclusion, Tolvaisas contends that the exhibitions had mixed results. On the one hand, they enhanced mutual understanding between the Cold War opponents. Soviet citizens got the chance to interact with Americans and learn more about life in the United States. This interaction, he argues "advanced Soviet citizens' understanding of American daily life, increased popular goodwill towards the United States, and stimulated Soviet consumerist desires," as well as enabling the American exhibition personnel – and the U.S. government -- to get a better knowledge of Soviet life. On the other hand, Soviet visitors did not learn much about American democracy, foreign policy, or capitalism – they were much more interested in material issues such as living standards and access to goods than they were in ideological issues.

The importance of Tolvaisas's article lies in the sensitivity and sophistication with which he deals with the question of the reception and impact of American material exhibitions on the Soviet public. Historians such as Walter Hixson have been too quick to assume that cultural exchange with its displays of material products had ideological consequences, and that "cultural infiltration" (Hixson's phrase) was effective in undermining the Soviet system by forcing Soviet leaders to try and deliver American-style consumer goods that they could not. Tolvaisas shows that for all Soviet citizens' interest in and goodwill toward the United States, they did not seem to grasp the ideological messages that the Americans wanted to transmit. I would go further and suggest that the ordinary Soviet citizens loved the material goods but paid little attention to the message. I remember how my Russian roommate came back to the dorm in Leningrad in 1988 raving about the movie "Wall Street," which he had just seen in a local cinema. When I asked him about the film's critical view of financial capitalism, he did not understand the question – to him it seemed that the film was a celebration of "the American dream," as he put it.

Tolvaisas should, however, point out there was still a great deal of enthusiasm for the socialist project in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the Soviet leaders were still confident that the tide of history was turning in favour of socialism and the popular cynicism that characterized the 1970s and 1980s had not yet set in. He could also make more use of the

comment books than he does, rather than citing them from other sources. Relying heavily on American sources and views is problematic, for Americans too often conflate foreigners' fascination for American life with admiration of the United States, but then there is little information on what ordinary Soviet citizens thought of the exhibitions other than the comment books. These minor criticisms aside, Tolvaisas provides us with a nuanced and persuasive view of the Soviet reception of American exhibitions during the Cold War.

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