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Xruščev and 1959. Contesting Consumption in the Cold War

Is the government as good as the exhibit?

Comment in the guestbook at the Soviet
Exhibition in New York, summer 1959

1. *USSR, Cold War and consumption*

During the 1950s, advocates of both capitalism and communism sought to conquer the hearts and minds of other countries by claiming to offer the best system when it came to people's welfare and their future¹. The ideological battles of the Cold War increasingly focused on citizens' well-being and on different models of consumption.

In its projection abroad, corporate America and U.S. foreign policy officials insisted on a model based on individual and unbridled consumption – as the American way of life – rather than on collective and cooperative forms of the same, thereby countering progressive Roosevelt's New Deal reforms (Henthorn 2006; Griffith 1983).

Unlike the USA, the Soviet Union based its model on a distinction between "rational" and "irrational" attitudes to consumption, stressing a fault line between "right" and "excessive." Soviet ideology privileged collective rather than individual forms of consumption in many fields, such as transport, food, housing, and so on. But in terms of satisfying the Soviet citizens' material needs, the welfare system was key. Moreover, official declarations stressed how the Soviet approach successfully fulfilled its citizens' all-round requirements. Indeed, the State-Party considered consumption as part of a broader concept of well-being (*blagosostojanie*), which covered both the population's materialistic and their non-materialistic needs.

Nevertheless, in spite of the official Communist Party line and ideology, individual and "not so rational" consumption had become an aspiration of both ordinary Soviets and of the *Nomenklatura*. Since Stalin's time, Soviet society had been bombarded with messages of *izobilie* ("abundance"), including consumer goods, which were to be the precondition for transition from socialism to communism².

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² Concerning *izobilie* see, for instance, Stalin 1976. The privileges of the *Nomenklatura*, as easy access to consumer goods and with a clear emphasis on individual consumption, have been described and studied by many scholars over the years. See, for instance, Voslensky 1984. As regards common Soviet citizens and individual consumption, as a prize for placing their savings in a bank, see for instance the eloquent advertisement in *Ogonek* 1955: "Money for valuable purchases can be deposited in a savings bank" (*Den'gi na pokupku cennyx veščej možno nakopit' v sberegatel'noj kasse*).

In this connection, it is important to underline that the Soviet Union did produce commercial advertising. At a first glance it could seem paradoxical, because in the USSR the economy was nationalized. Soviet advertising differed from the Western model mainly because ideologically its purpose was purely informative; nevertheless, the final aim of making goods attractive and slogans snappy did have analogies with Western marketing³.

Advertisements had appeared in the Soviet Union even before Xruščev, but the 1950s were a decade when the world of consumption was changing everywhere and the USSR was increasingly competing with capitalist countries in this regard, especially with the U.S.: advertising had to be a significant tool in the Soviet campaign about more and better consumer goods for the people. Evidence of this is the growing attention paid to advertising by the specialized journal *Sovetskaja torgovlja* (*Soviet Trade*), issued in 1952, as well as by *Torgovlja za rubežom* (*Foreign Trade*), issued in the same year (Učenova 2004: 166-169). During the 1950s advertising production still had no central agency devoted to do it. Different ministries and different institutions organized advertising campaigns, even if the Soviet Ministry of Trade prevailed over the others at least until 1958, when it was replaced with national ministries of trade. On the other hand, the cooperative system had a single agency called *Kooptorgreklama*, which started up in 1958⁴.

Paradoxically, a contradictory situation had thus arisen. It can find an explanation in the widespread debates that were already taking place at that time about the possibility of increasing the quality of production thanks to the improved planning facilitated by mathematical analyses done by electronic calculators. Others believed that better quality production could be achieved by gradually granting factories greater autonomy, as supported by the Soviet economist E. Liberman (Graziosi 2008: 210, 211; Sharpe 1966).

In 1959 the Soviet government was determined to shape a Socialist way of consumption, in preparation for the Communist era. This seemed feasible, along with the proposal of an alternative to Europe, since it was the USSR that was leading technology, after launching the Sputnik into space (Whitfield 1996; Henthorn 2006). Internationally, advancements in space exploration were a chance to win over new supporters to the communist cause. Domestically, it offered the chance to spread the institutional enthusiasm of the party to society at large. The Cold War emphasized a link between technology, living standards and consumption. In both the Soviet and the American press, articles appeared about exchanges between the USSR and the USA in 1959 – where consumption played an important role – and these were published alongside articles reporting on the space conquest⁵.

³ Examples of Soviet advertisements can be found on the fourth covers of the weekly magazine *Ogonek*. See Moretto 2005; 2010.

⁴ Documents about *Kooptorgreklama* are preserved in the Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE): RGAEb.

⁵ About American ambitions in the space race see: *Life International* 1959b. As regards the Soviet press: Krylov 1959; *Ogonek* 1959c.

Many historians have analyzed the Cold War and 1959, focusing on the Soviet exhibition in New York, on the American exhibition in Moscow and also on Xruščev's trip to the U.S. Nevertheless, the "consumption contest" of 1959 has been analyzed in political rather than in cultural terms or with minimal attention to the Soviet press and to the Soviet archival sources and points of view.

This paper uses both official and popular Soviet sources as well as the American press when this helps to clarify the difference between Soviet and American propaganda attitudes, as well as archival documents from the RGAE (Russian State Archive of the Economy). As far as the popular press is concerned, here we have used above all the Soviet weekly magazine *Ogonek* and the monthly *L'Union Soviétique*⁶. As regards popular American sources, the article takes into consideration the *Ogonek* counterpart *Life*⁷.

2. *Framing the debate*

After World War II, war-torn Europe had to be rebuilt. The Soviet socioeconomic model was an inspiration for many socialists and communists in Western Europe and for independent movements throughout the colonial and neo-colonial world. At the same time Western Europe was charmed by the Marshall Plan and by the economic principles of corporate America. After Stalin's death in 1953, the new Soviet leader Nikita Xruščev initiated a process of destalinization or "thaw," a period characterized by numerous reforms and changes. As part of these reforms, the Soviet Union also engaged in a relationship with the United States through what was termed "peaceful coexistence." But the communist coexistence with the capitalist world also faced the Soviet Union with another challenge: from then on, the competition and its propaganda was not only based on weapons and space technologies, but increasingly on living standards and so on consumption – and here the Soviet Union had a much harder time.

The USSR was considered a great power. But Xruščev understood that this was not enough. Material changes in the daily life of ordinary Soviet citizens were also essential. After the huge sacrifices that the Soviets had suffered during the war and under Stalinist terror, the new political climate had raised expectations of better times and material wealth to come. The party leadership had taken note of the country's mood.

By the end of the 1950s, economic and ideological competition between the Soviet Union and the United States had become intense. The U.S. had emerged from the Second World War as an economic and military giant. On its part, the Soviet State-Party feared the influence of Western consumer culture – a fear perfectly illustrated by reports on the Christian Dior fashion show held in Moscow in June 1959. Soviet "rational" fashion had to come to grips with the provocative style of the Western trendsetters. As Western observ-

⁶ Before *URSS en construction* (1930-1950).

⁷ Interesting was the controversy between *Ogonek* and *Life* in 1957, when they accused each other of deforming the other country's reality about consumption: *Lajf* 1957.

ers were eager to report, Soviet women were intrigued by Western elegance: “Within a week or two you began to see girls on Gor’kij Street wearing imitations of the more simple Dior styles” the *New York Times* Moscow reporter Harrison Evans Salisbury wrote (Salisbury 1960: 47, quoted by Reid 2002: 238). The Soviet magazine *Ogonek* framed the show differently. Despite a few appreciative comments, the journalist stressed that the Dior collection was impractical for everyday use. It also believed the high prices were prohibitive. *Ogonek* interviewed Henri Fayol of *maison* Dior to conclude that Dior’s designs did not express national character – a remark that could be construed as a criticism because Soviet institutions paid close attention to the many national cultures within the USSR. The article also emphasized that the designer’s clothes had a short life span and would be out of fashion within six months. Such a definition of fashion was worlds away from the Soviet idea of the aesthetics of consumer goods. Goods were supposed to be of long-lasting beauty and not just the product of a designer’s whim or one season’s fashion. The party strongly rejected the commercial logic of planned obsolescence (Kosygin 1953; Žukov 1954)⁸. *Ogonek* used the term *žertva mody* (“fashion victim,” a term widely used today) to describe Western consumers’ submission and obedience to the dictates of fashion. It positioned itself as a defender of consumers. By contrast, American *Life* magazine presented photos of tall high-fashion female models as opposed to the simply dressed Soviet women, trying to suggest a fundamental difference and hierarchy between the West and the East, between the advanced glamorous West and the backward ill-clad dreary East (*Life International* 1959a; Troickaja 1959b).

The fact of the matter is that the Soviet State-Party consented to certain aspects of the new consumer culture, first through the notion of the utopia of communism as one of future abundance and second by emphasizing the aesthetic side of consumer goods. It frequently made small concessions to certain “irrational” desires.

The individual’s solution to the consumption issue, despite the collective attitude, had been partly legitimized already under Stalinism (a period when dictatorship overwhelmed the revolutionary ideals in many fields). The State-Party still promoted collective solutions but in numerous situations (and in magazines and on posters) the suggestion of an individual way of consuming was widespread. One example was that in 1936 Staxanov received a car as a gift for his contribution in the field of Socialist work. The result was a complexity of messages: for sure people’s desires grew over the years. The Soviet leaders had a hard time differentiating between needs and wants. They made such a differentiation by focusing on rational consumption: this answered a need, while irrational consumption was a luxury. But the message was not clear.

We have underlined that also in the Soviet Union there were campaigns and advertisements designed to orientate consumers. The growing importance that the USSR gave to advertising – not only inside the country but also throughout the Socialist bloc – is well documented by the Prague meeting on advertising in 1957. The conference

⁸ Cf. Polynin 1956. On the concept of psychological obsolescence cf. Marling 1994: 265.

(*Meždunarodnaja konferencija rabotnikov reklamy*: International conference of advertising workers) took place from 9 to 21 December and was organized by representatives of the ministries of trade of the USSR, the GDR and Czechoslovakia. It was open to other Socialist countries and was the first of several meetings on the same subject. As a result, the main features of socialist advertising were established and underlined. First of all, advertising in Socialist countries was to educate people's tastes, develop their needs and shape their demand for goods; secondly, it was to help consumers by providing them with information about the most rational way to consume goods; thirdly, it aimed to promote the growth of trade culture (Degtjarev, Kornilov 1969: 15, 16).

Reading archival documents about a preliminary meeting in Prague to organize the conference, it is clear that the State wanted to improve relations between Soviet consumers and their market. The year 1957 marked the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution, and the organizers wanted to make the event an important step in the field of Socialist competition and exchange (RGAEf). Soviet organizers gave instructions to ministries of Soviet republics and to all the institutions working on advertising to present the best materials on the theme they had for the Prague meeting. Anyway, the words of the Soviet delegate at the preliminary meeting suggest a Soviet interest in the Czech trade organization, a fact that reveals gaps that the USSR wanted to bridge, even inside the Bloc. In particular, the Soviet delegate pointed to three possible innovations that the USSR could imitate. The first was a system of self-service shops (in 1957 there were already 70 such shops in Czechoslovakia); this innovation was supposed to modernize the Soviet distribution system, and had already been proposed for the cities of Moscow and Leningrad in 1955 but had never been accomplished. The second innovative example from the Czechoslovak experience involved opening bars that would only sell milk products: this is reminiscent of Soviet governments' repeated attempts throughout the Soviet era (including the ruinous 1985 anti-alcohol campaign) to fight the country's chronic alcoholism problem. The third idea was to allow *magaziny-zakusočnye*, shops with small kitchens, where take-away meals, hot dishes and snacks would be purchased, or where people could stop for lunch. In brief, these were the ideas put forward for modernizing trade in the USSR. At the Prague meeting the three organizing countries agreed on something very practical. Alongside official speeches, there were to be exchanges of experiences and know-how on two key sections – *oformlenie okonnyx vitrin* (shop window design) and *pečatnaja reklama i kinoreklama* (print and film advertising) –, with two final goals: to improve advertising and to analyze its role within the socialist system. They thus decided to exchange material illustrating the status of advertising in each country, and to discuss personnel training in the field of advertising, advertising events during the meeting, and advertising contests (RGAEf).

In the meantime, Xruščev frequently insisted on the importance for the Soviet Union of producing more and better consumer goods and of improving its trade system. At least in theory and in its propaganda, the party focused on the Soviet citizen as a consumer⁹. In

⁹ See the words of Xruščev at the XX Congress: *Rapporto* 1956: 46.

1957 Xruščev had vowed “to reach and exceed” the United States in *per capita* production of basic foodstuffs such as butter, milk and meat within the shortest period of time. The extraordinary 21st Congress of the Soviet Communist Party held early in 1959 confirmed that ambition, approving the Seven-Year Plan (*semiletka*). By 1965, Soviet production was scheduled to be approaching that of the United States of America. And by 1980, the USSR Communist Party promised that the Soviet Union would exceed the U.S. in *per capita* production to approach the highest standard of living in the world¹⁰.

3. Exchanges

On 27 January 1958 a Soviet-American deal was agreed concerning exchanges in the fields of culture, technology and education. On 10 September of that same year a deal on a mutual exchange of exhibitions set the seal for a new policy of peaceful coexistence between the two countries (RGAEc)¹¹.

The Soviet exhibition opened in New York on 30 June – for 40 days – at the “Coliseum” center as a demonstration of Soviet technological know-how. It had nine main sectors including four dedicated to living conditions in the USSR: VI *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR* (Public education in the USSR); VII *Oxrana zdorov’ja naselenija SSSR* (Health care in the USSR); VIII *Kul’tura v SSSR* (Culture in the USSR); IX *Žizn’ i blagosostojanie sovetskogo naroda* (Life and well-being of the Soviet people) (RGAEc). Only the ninth sector was dedicated to consumer goods. It was evident that, beyond Soviet shortcomings in this sphere, well-being was presented as something that included welfare, so with a broader meaning than just consumer goods: that was quite different from the ideology that the U.S. Government promoted. Actually, the ninth sector of the exhibition also underlined the workers’ achievements, such as a society without unemployment, with a real right to work, without differences between women’s and men’s salaries; in brief, it aimed to express the idea that “Soviet citizens do not have to worry about tomorrow” (“*sovetskomu človeku ne prihoditsja zadumyvati’sja o zavtrašnem dne*”). Slogans at the exhibition tried to impress American visitors with words and figures taken from Soviet official statistics, such as “The production of consumer goods in 1958 is approximately 14 times greater in the USSR than in 1913,” referring to the past, and “By 1965 the USSR plans to produce 62-65% more consumer goods than in 1958,” referring to the future. Documents about the plans for the exhibition reveal that the main goal was to show “the exceptional achievements of the Soviet people,” “their well-being” and “the advantages of socialism” (RGAEc).

¹⁰ Usually the plan was for five years (*pjatiletka* in Russian): this seven-year plan shows the intense climate and the will for advancement of the Soviet leadership of that period. See *Cifre obiectivo* 1959: 18; Žukov 1959: 7, 8, 77. As regards the 22nd Congress see *XXII Congresso* 1962: 767. Cf. Nove 1969: 401.

¹¹ About the two exhibitions, Hixson 1997: chapter 6 and 7.

The Soviet exhibition displayed the latest mechanical equipment, models of metallurgic *kombinat*, the ice-breaker “Lenin,” the Stalingrad power plant, the first three Sputniks, and so on. There were also cars, such as “ZIL-111,” “GAZ-13 Čajka,” “Volga” in the new M-21 version, “Moskvič” in the new 407 version. But these were not mass produced cars and, moreover, the USSR had a very low number of private vehicles in comparison with the United States, even if their intention was to underline their preference for a collective solution to the public transport issue. The range of items on show went from watches to full-scale renderings of fully equipped 3-room model apartments, radios, TV sets and refrigerators. And then, articles of clothing and food.

Everything projected a prosperous and technologically advanced country that showed “how quickly the USSR is moving on the path of technological progress, [...] what happy prospects the Seven-year plan opens up” (Boľšakov 1959)¹². Despite the display of consumer goods, however, the real Soviet showpiece was its heavy machinery.

Comments in the original guestbook of the Soviet exhibition in New York are revealing: the opinions of the American visitors to the show can be distinguished into two main categories: positive and negative (RGAEd). The positive ones include, for example: “I wish you all good fortune in gaining peace, happiness and well-being [...] I was very impressed with your health program and medical care.” Or there are kind words from an American student of the Russian language, in broken Russian. And: “I hope your people are enjoying ours in Moscow as much as we Americans have. [...] I hope our nations will always know peace and will never have a war.” The theme of the war was widespread in a lot of comments as well as words like “hope” and “God.” Other visitors wrote for instance: “Many questions are left to be answered by the viewer. [...] however, you have a very impressive display”; “I love the Russian people. [...] I do not like the form of government. The exhibition is very good.” For someone else the exhibition had been “quite enlightening” and for others the show would help the two countries. Others observed: “progress made by the USSR within the last 20 years is remarkable”; “our populace is tremendously ignorant of present-day Russia. [...] ignorance which is indeed an iron curtain.” There were also enthusiastic comments, like “Congratulations from an American Railroad Worker.”

As was to be expected, many other visitors expressed negative opinions about the exhibition, and also about the Soviet Union. Some comments pointed out the gap between the exhibits displayed and the life of common Soviet citizens. A man from Ohio State: “I am impressed with your displays but I do not believe that the people of your country enjoy the high standards of living which you display here.” Others wrote: “this exhibition [...] doesn’t really show how Russia actually is”; “Some of the exhibits would never be found in a typical Russian home, since the Russians don’t have such a high standard of living.” Some

¹² Cf. *Oblik* 1959; Novikov 1959; Mandel 1959. Marling 1994: 255-260, see her comment under a picture (p. 259) showing Soviet fashion in NY: “U.S. Propaganda agencies delighted in pictures of Russian women wearing fashion that looked dated and dowdy in comparison to American finery.”

comments tried to underline the supposed superiority of the U.S.: “This whole exhibit stinks. It doesn’t show what the people like or how they think. None of the Russian cars can compare with the ‘lowliest’ American model. Industry in America is way ahead. [...] Thank God I’m American.”

Cars were often quoted, and it is interesting to notice how the car was considered a symbol of well-being: “Why don’t we see the prices of the items in your exhibition? [...] I do not think that any of your workers could afford to buy a car, ever the smallest you had here.” Again on prices: “Consumer items should have their prices indicated. The prices should be shown in relation to the average Russian miners yearly, monthly or daily wage”; “I really don’t feel that I have been shown real Soviet life, and there are very few guides to ask questions.” Or a woman wrote in not too correct Russian: “*Vse očen’ nravit’sja menja zdes’, tol’ko žal’ bolšoj čto graždanin russkij ne možit’ ešče pol’zovat’sja vašim progressom kak my zdes’ v Amerike*” (I liked very much everything here, but it’s a pity that the Russian citizen cannot yet enjoy your progress as we do here in America). Another comment in (not always correct) Russian was: “*Vse, čto ja videla èto est’ ne dlja potrebitelja vašego naroda, a tol’ko dlja vystavki*” (Everything I have seen is not for your consumers but just for the exhibition).

A visitor described Soviet people as “soulless monsters” and ended in this way: “figures mean nothing. In two words IT STINKS [in capital letters].” With the same style: “Too much machines and too little of man!”

Many underlined their opinion that religious rights were denied in the USSR. Others complained about the organization of the exhibition: “[...] neither could carry on a conversation in English well enough [...]. If there had been more guides that were available for conversing, I’m sure the whole exhibit would be more effective”; “The explanations are inadequate [...]. This makes the exhibit meaningless”; “Few people to answer questions.”

A man simply wrote “PROPAGANDA!!!” and another from Texas by the name of Carlos Castillo: “You don’t fool us for one minute.” The word “propaganda” was widespread like: “Impressive in part but I can assure you that the average American working man is not impressed by your propaganda [...] I myself am a working man”; “[...] propaganda is your motto [...] peaceful coexistence is not possible”; another observed: “A quite interesting show, but equipment used seemed to be cheap and junky. There didn’t seem to be any imagination in the work and I doubt if there are any new ideas exposed by the Red Lie except those of propaganda.”

An engineer gave a very rational comment expressing a sincere interest in the exhibition but also writing: “[...] Typical home, T.V., general appliances for people in Russia of poor manufacturing quality.” A woman pointed out that in the exhibition everything seemed to her “big and inhuman” adding “And why, why, why don’t the guides smile?”. Concluding, a man quoted Stalin, writing: “A fine exhibit, but why no mention of J. Stalin and his regime which made it all possible?”; and another one ironically commented: “Is the government as good as the exhibit?” (RGAEd).

Before Xruščev came to the U.S., American vice-president Richard Nixon had visited the American exhibition held in Moscow. Nixon’s visit became the platform for the

so-called “Kitchen debate,” in which the American vice-president and the Soviet premier fought the Cold War in terms of consumption in front of a General Electric Co. American kitchen. Nixon’s visit to Moscow that summer had taken Xruščev by surprise as the debate had shifted from a contest over space to a struggle over domestic appliances¹³. The Soviet Union, less interested in individual kitchens with gadgets, continued its far more effective rhetoric of space conquest and the Sputnik.

For the Soviets, the “Kitchen debate” did not revolve around the gadgets but around a typical socialist question: how to liberate women from “domestic slavery” (*kuxonnoe rabstvo* in Russian) so they could join the workforce and gain freedom. Kitchens, household appliances, and furniture became nevertheless current in the Soviet Union as part of a wide-ranging debate over the 1954 housing program which kept a safe distance from the “utopian” solution of the *kommunalka* – communal house (Xruščev, Bulganin 1955; *Arhitektura* 1955)¹⁴. Xruščev began to mobilize household appliances for propaganda purposes at home. Soviet magazines were filled with advertisements of vacuum cleaners or floor polishers as household appliances proved to be the most favorite avenue to focus on consumption (*Ogonek* 1954a; *Ogonek* 1954b). Like corporate advertisers in the West, Soviet propaganda promised that these objects would “ease women’s work.” The Soviet press did hint at the prohibitive prices for ordinary Soviet citizens; often the models shown were prototypes or not (yet) for sale. Journalists at times admitted the important propaganda role that prototypes played in suggesting possible solutions for the future. For instance, prototypes were advertised as a solution for collective use of household appliances in new housing complexes (Miletskij 1956).

The projection of the future onto technology was widespread in the Soviet discourse, suggesting that the future was already here; not far away in utopias. The press celebrated new models of furniture, TV, and other domestic items with names associated with space conquest, such as radio “Atmosfera” or TV “Sputnik.” These novelties were often just presented as prototypes at such domestic exhibitions as the famous VDNKh (*Vystavka Dostizhenij Narodnogo Xozjajstva*), the Expo of the Achievements of the National Economy in Moscow (Troickaja 1959c; Bobrov 1960). But so did American corporations. They widely used the display of prototypes as visual aids with technological promises for the future as narrative devices at international fairs¹⁵.

In 1959 and in the following years, the two superpowers’ exposure to each other expanded, but it was through thick layers of intense propaganda and media flows. On both sides,

¹³ Cf. Dodd 1959. This is an article written in the Soviet press by an American who writes: “At the exhibition the visitor is invited to think that the middle-class American lives in a carefree luxury.” Then: “Alas, statistics, information materials on various aspects of American life are deformed up to ridicule.”

¹⁴ The results were the so-called *xruščoby*: from Xruščev and *truščoby* (slums).

¹⁵ The use of prototypes to induce desire was also a practice of U.S. corporations: Henthorn 2006.

the distinctions between propaganda, information, and advertising had been completely obscured. During the year both the American and the Soviet press submitted numerous articles on their respective opponent, in which two opposing tropes emerged. The American press stressed the intransigent Soviet culture. Its Soviet counterpart focused on America's social problems such as unemployment (or absence of welfare) and racial prejudices¹⁶.

The Cold War was being fought through prototypes of products and fairs to display them with images widely circulated around the world. Propaganda required words, fast and incisive sentences, and powerful images on the consumer issue. Both American and Soviet consensus machines sought to seduce the other. The American point of view incessantly stressed the link between consumer goods and political freedom, reifying the concept of freedom to the freedom of consumption, freedom of choice, and the free-market system. The U.S. government was set on peppering the debate with the notion of "plenty" at any point – an especially dangerous route for the Soviets (Cf. Marling 1994: 269, 270. See Carbone 2009: 59).

During the American exhibition in Moscow Richard Nixon had deliberately shifted attention away from the space race to consumer culture. If the American vice-president had seemed to have taken the upper hand in Moscow in his focus on consumer goods and abundance, on his visit Xruščev tried to shift the international attention back to the Soviet production frame of debate. He presented the Soviet Union as a developed nation, whose output in cattle breeding, meat, eggs, and wool had been greater during the past five years (*Khrushchev in America* 1960: 155, 156).

4. *Visiting the U.S.*

During the summer of 1959 the exchange of national exhibitions gave the two countries a chance to taste the respective propaganda. But, the relationship between the superpowers was also beset by several unsolved international questions. According to the RGANI¹⁷ sources used by the historian Irina Kazarina, it is clear that the need was felt for an exchange not only of exhibitions but also of visits from the respective leaders. The Cold War had different battle-fronts. Competition on consumption (models and goods) was one of them: it was a front that could win over new supporters, both at home and abroad. Moreover, because of the U.S. presidential elections in 1960, U.S. republicans wanted to conquer Americans by their secure behavior towards Russians. So, Xruščev's trip to the U.S. was set within the frame of international political issues, although to a certain extent it continued the spirit of the exchange of exhibitions. Since early 1959, after Mikojan's informal visit to the U.S., America and the USSR started contemplating the possibility of talks

¹⁶ As regards articles about respective opponents: *Eisenhower guide* 1959; Gray 1959. American press on the intransigent Soviet culture: Mandel 1959. Soviet press on the problems of American society: Bonoskij 1959.

¹⁷ Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, Moscow.

between their respective leaders. In June 1959, during the Soviet exhibition in New York, Kozlov (vice-president of the Soviet Council of Ministers) and Eisenhower, along with others, discussed the matter again and finally, in July, the idea of two Xruščev-Eisenhower meetings, first in the States and then in the Soviet Union, was agreed (Kazarina 2004)¹⁸.

Xruščev's trip marked the first visit of a Soviet leader to the U.S. and dramatized the message of "peaceful competition" between the two superpowers¹⁹. His American journey lasted two weeks. Like a contemporary Peter the Great he came to the West as a "scientific" tourist; but unlike the Russian Tsar of yore, the Soviet leader did not seek to import western models for Russia – at least ideas – but to convince the West of the superiority of the Soviet model and, of course, to collect impressions about the opponent. In line with the propaganda aim, Xruščev flew to the States in an ultra-modern Tupolev to impress his American hosts. He inspected the country he sought to exceed, but he especially used the trip to propagandize his ideology through quips and his use of ironic figures of speech²⁰. With his wife Nina Petrovna and sons, he landed in Washington on 15 September and went to New York a few days later to speak at the United Nations. Xruščev stressed the importance of ending the arms race he defined as "a heavy burden on the people [...] causing rising prices on consumer goods, depressing real wages, harmfully affecting the economy of many states, disrupting international trade" (*Khrushchev in America* 1960: 78)²¹. In Washington the diplomatic discussions centered on foreign affairs such as the German issue, international disarmament, and trade between the USSR and the USA²². International political problems emerged, but the international "audience" the Cold War needed was very sensitive to the theme of living standards, well-being, and consumption.

At the press conference Xruščev was quizzed about trade and economics. When journalists asked him about the increase in trade between the United States and the Soviet Union in consumer goods, he explained the gap between the USSR and the U.S. by arguing that America had taken "the path of capitalist development much earlier" in comparison with the development of his own country, and that the Soviet economy was however growing. This argument – the comparison with the past – was typical of the official Soviet discourse on the economy which saw industrial development as one of the necessary and predetermined stages on the road to communism. Xruščev thus sought to put the discussion about Soviet trade on the same playing field as his host (*Khrushchev in America* 1960: 27). He tried to present the Soviet Government as a promoter of proposals for "peace" (the

¹⁸ On the visit see also Magnúsdóttir 2006.

¹⁹ On the press conference of Xruščev announcing his visit to U.S.: Ogonek 1959a.

²⁰ These "qualities" of the Soviet Premier are very well described in Carlson 2009a.

²¹ On Xruščev in New York see also *The 13 Days* 1959: 19, "Friday. Still in New York, Khrushchev made a plea before the United Nations for disarmament within four years. Then, like any tourist, he went to the 86th storey platform of the Empire State Building".

²² On the departure of Xruščev from Moscow: Ogonek 1959b. On his arrival: Ivanov 1959a. The celebratory style used in these articles by the Soviet press is clear.

classic Soviet slogan was *Miru – mir*: “Peace to the world”), “friendship,” (the usual slogan about the Soviet inclination to this international value was *Družba narodov*: “Friendship between Peoples”), and “peaceful coexistence,” all terms closely linked with a broad concept of well-being. Tying it to the notion of “competition,” he declared: “Let us rather compete in who builds more homes, schools and hospitals for the people; produces more grain, milk, meat, clothing and other consumer goods; and not in who has more hydrogen bombs and rockets.” By showing armaments as “a bottomless pit” for “human energy” and public money, Xruščev moved the question of competition to welfare and material living standards which was, as he said, “to build homes for the people, new schools for their children, free hospitals for those who need medical treatment.” (*Khrushchev in America* 1960: 84, 85, 78, 95). This was the argument the USSR used to counteract the propaganda that corporate America was increasingly displaying on consumer goods and individual consumption.

Next, Xruščev flew to California to attend an elaborate luncheon held in his honor at the 20th Century Fox studios²³. Here, he debated with Spyros P. Skouras, owner of the studios, about the notion of self-emancipation through social mobility as a key element of the “American dream” – or capitalist way of life – in contrast to the idea of Socialist democracy, where theoretically the people owned the means of production. The Hollywood executive presented the Soviet leader with his life story as an example of the American dream. As an immigrant from Greece, he had reached the level of company president coming through the ranks by working his way up since he was 12 years old. This remarkable upward social mobility failed to impress the Soviet leader Xruščev, who responded that he too had started working when he was very young and now led a superpower. In the encounter, the American concept of freedom had met its counterpart in the “Soviet Dream” of the proletariat moving upwards together. The first could be traced to personal biography, the second to the biography of a whole people²⁴.

Still in Hollywood, Xruščev encountered another significant facet of the West-East relation. It happened when he watched a dance scene from the film *Can-Can* with actress Shirley MacLaine, a musical performed especially for the foreign guests. The scene provoked Xruščev’s offensive comment “pornography” to describe what he witnessed, adding: “Humanity’s face is more beautiful than its backside.” In the comment he sought to highlight the American tendency for vulgarity and superficiality (*The 13 Days* 1959: 20)²⁵. Soviet dogmas often described the West as decadent particularly when it came to morals²⁶. The comment also showed the enormous gap between the official Soviet culture and

²³ Cf. Oldenziel, Zachmann 2009: 1.

²⁴ Cf. Carlson 2009b; *Speech* 1960. On the visit to Hollywood see also: *Chez les stars* 1959. Cf. Marling 1994: 250-252.

²⁵ See also: www.shirleymaclaine.com/shirley/movies-cancan.php (accessed 20/06/2012).

²⁶ Remember Xruščev’s heavy comment at the famous art show at Manež in Moscow in December 1962.

American commercial culture. The Soviet leader tried to paint the Hollywood film industry – America’s most successful export product and icon of consumer culture – as vulgar and, by extension, American consumer philosophy in general. The leader scored a point. Soviet cultural production had not opened to the exploitation of women’s sexuality and violence through images or words. It gave Soviet consumer goods a clean image in part; it was a system without competition that had few incentives for using “special effects” for commercial gain²⁷.

In the struggle over consumer culture, in a way California represented the most significant leg of Xruščev’s tour. Here the Soviet leader saw different innovations of the booming postwar Californian economy characterized by a partnership between the military-industrial complex, the universities, and Hollywood that offered the best examples of the country’s progress and modernity. California offered the future, a theme that figured prominently in Soviet ideology as well. The communist utopia that was supposed to transform today into tomorrow was already in the process of transforming “wooden Russia” (*derevjannaja Rus*) to a “more modern” society of steel and machines. In the USSR, where the utopia continued to be articulated by the party under Xruščev’s leadership, the concepts of “innovation” or “future” acquired a particularly strong meaning which people perceived. Xruščev was associated with a period in which chemistry, plastic and innovations in the distribution of consumer goods were at the top of the agenda and the focus of propaganda²⁸.

Still in California, on September 20 and 21, Xruščev went to San Francisco, where he visited a large supermarket that had a special appeal to Soviets in their aspirations to produce a modern distribution system through efficiency and innovative organization (*The 13 Days* 1959: 21). He also visited a fast food restaurant. For Xruščev the American fast food example held great promise for its system of collective food provisioning. It was central to Xruščev’s revolution in consumption. Canteens (*stolovye*) – in housing complexes, factories, and government buildings (here the term *fabrika-kuxnja*, “mechanized canteen,” was used) – were a key infrastructure in feeding Soviet society. It was also an ideologically important building block in providing collective solutions to food consumption that would simultaneously free women from “domestic slavery” (*En visite* 1959: 33)²⁹.

The retail trade, self-service (*samoobsluživanje*), and modern canteens had played a role in the Seven-Year plan adopted during the 21st Congress in 1959 and again after the U.S. trip during the 22nd Congress in 1961. Both stressed the importance of modernizing

²⁷ Cf. Zaxarčenko 1960.

²⁸ As regards chemistry and plastics: Kosygin 1953: 19; Ogonek 1956 (this is an advertisement about plastic products); *L’Union Soviétique* 1958; Troickaja 1959a; *Encore un pas* 1959; *Bol’saja ximija* 1960. Reid 2002: 235. As regards innovations in Soviet shops: Čerevko 1959; Xrabrova 1959.

²⁹ Concerning self-service and canteens: Moretto 2005: 102. As regards the importance of such topics in the Soviet press: Illeč. 1957; Polynin 1959; Šmelev 1959; concerning canteens in houses: Mileckij 1959.

restaurants, canteens, and shops³⁰. The party leader focused again on the self-service system during his visit to the IBM Corporation Plant in San Jose where he told the President of the Corporation: “[...] I really like the method of self-service used here in your cafeteria. We are using the same method, but not widely enough. Your example is worthy of imitation at our own factories” (*Khrushchev’s Speech* 1960: 140, 141)³¹.

As already mentioned about the 1957 Prague meeting on advertising in Socialist countries, self-service and the modernization of trade were important topics for the Soviet regime, and the United States had been observed and studied closely even before 1959. Indeed in 1956, from 31 October to 17 November, a Soviet delegation had gone to the States specifically to examine American mass food services. The delegation included six representatives of Soviet trade and food institutions. In New York, Chicago and Washington the group visited restaurants, cafeterias, café, bars, snack bars in drugstores, food industries, food storehouses and department stores. The visit also included the General Food Corporation’s research laboratory and a scientific center of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Soviet delegates wrote in their report that it was rare to find *stolovye* (canteens) in the States and there was no specific institute or organization for mass food service, and that the whole system was in the hands of private owners. Beyond those notes, the Soviet group tried to collect useful information about what they thought could be used by the USSR to make their food service more modern and efficient. As it was also topical in 1959, following their visit, the delegation indicated these points as goals for the development of the Soviet food supply system: self-service organization (*samoobsluživanie*), prepared food (*polufabrikaty*), frozen food and cold chain, packaging and greater care about food transportation (RGAEe).

In September 1959 the Soviet delegation then visited farms and sites linked to the agricultural sector, a theme which was taken into serious consideration by Xruščev, who had inaugurated both the Virgin Lands project and the *kukuruzna* campaign. On 23 September the delegation went to Iowa to visit the modern corn and cattle farm of Roswell Garst, who already exported hybrid corn seeds to the USSR (Frese 2004)³². To the Soviets, agricultural technology was particularly important since they were either ahead or could at least compete on the same playing field. Xruščev continued his trip to a scientific agricultural center in Maryland and to a large engineering factory in Pittsburgh (*En visite* 1959: 24; *L’Union Soviétique* 1959: 43; *The 13 Days* 1959: 22). Finally the last days were dedicated to political talks between the two leaders.

Building reputations was a fundamental element of the Cold War. Both American and Soviet propaganda sought to convince their own public opinion using numerous stereotypes, while omitting their own problems on the issue of standards of living. The Soviet press, and in particular the weekly *Ogonek*, frequently emphasized the Soviet and Xruščev’s attention to agriculture during the 1959 visit, showing the leader as a serious

³⁰ Concerning new shops: *105000 nouveaux* 1961.

³¹ See also Ivanov 1959c: 3.

³² Cf. *L’Union Soviétique* 1959; *The 13 Days* 1959: 22.

man with practical but also scientific interests. The Soviet press cast the Soviet leader as someone who was an honest supporter of peace and friendship and who, thanks to these values, could relate to people, and also as a leader who was often hindered in his mission by American security personnel (Ivanov 1959b). He was represented as a leader of the people, surrounded by large crowds of Americans (Ivanov 1959c). The image stemmed from the desire of the Soviet press to present the intimate relationship between the Soviet leadership and common people as a characteristic feature of a communist regime, which was, in brief, the Soviet slogan of the unity between party and people. By contrast, the Soviet press tried to show the United States as an oligarchy rather than a democracy, and as a country beset with unemployment, racism, violence, and consumer goods that were not accessible for all: an unequal society (Bonoskij 1959; Voronov 1959)³³.

The American press mostly focused on the erratic behavior of the Soviet leader during his visit, on a man who wanted to “convince Americans that from now on they must coexist with the Soviet Union and with Soviet power – basically on Soviet terms.” Xruščev was described as an overbearing politician, who had landed in America to present his “peaceful coexistence” through proposing “the Soviet way” as “the only way.” For the American press, during the nationwide tour Xruščev had given “a self-portrait of a strong, indomitable figure who proposed to demand and get far more than he would give,” as *Life* wrote. It described Xruščev as Janus-faced: with the people he was simple and amusing, but with politicians and businessmen he was a man of power, formidable and intimidating. Talking about the relationship between Xruščev and the American people, it claimed that Americans were not convinced by the Soviet leader who “demonstrated that he neither sought nor expected explicit approval of Americans,” only to conclude that: “Most people who heard and saw him [...] would say that they don’t buy the Xruščev bill of goods any more now than they did before he came” (Osborne 1959).

Beyond the more official part of the visit, the Soviet delegation was certainly struck by the power of communicating the aesthetic side of the American world of consumption. The Soviet Union was making efforts to improve its communication on consumption. So for instance, in 1959 an exhibition was held in Moscow about food advertising, posters and catalogs. A glance at the archives about the exhibition (original models of packages, labels and poster advertisements of many different products) reveals the aesthetic care and attention that Soviet institutions and artists made when producing those samples (RGAEa).

Conclusion

“Seeing” (and thus believing) played a key role during the Cold War and in particular during the “peaceful competition.” Within this framework, international exhibitions, as visual representations, played a crucial role. In the commercial system of capitalist countries the iconography of consumption was developed to rather sophisticated levels. At the

³³ See also Zaxarčenko 1960.

same time the Soviet Union inherited the century-long Russian iconographic tradition (ranging from icons to *lubok*) and developed in depth the tradition of the *plakat* (poster) for political purposes but also in the commercial field. The Cold War and Xruščev's challenge to the West, which grew in intensity after his visit to the U.S., only increased the emphasis on consumer goods with articles in the press and advertisements that created "windows" to the world of desire. The party's new policy appealed to the Soviet people, but the party also continued its official ideology, thereby persisting in ambiguity. The official theme of "rational consumption" was mixed first with the idea of new (*novyj*), and second with aesthetic concepts such as elegant (*èlegantnyj*) and beautiful (*krasivyj*), and also with the idea of comfortable (*ujutnyj*). The Soviet effort to create its own Socialist way of a consumption regime – already strewn with ambiguous messages from Stalin – acquired new ambiguity in response to the exposure to Western aesthetics. In the following years the debate on the socialist alternative model would take the path of the Kосygin reforms but was also stopped after the invasion of Czechoslovakia (Graziosi 2008: 310-312, 359, 365)³⁴.

Corporate America was building a strong culture of individual consumption, or consumerism, aiming at conquering Europe and not only. But in 1959 the alternative paths to material well-being were still open.

Abbreviations

- 105000 nouveaux* 1961: *105000 nouveaux magasins*, "L'Union Soviétique", 1961, 131, pp. 10-13.
- Arxitektura* 1955: "Arxitektura SSSR", 1955, 11, pp. 57-58.
- Bol'saja ximija* 1960: *Bol'saja ximija*, "Ogonek", 1960, 49, p. 1.
- Chez les stars* 1959: *Chez les stars d'Hollywood*, "L'Union Soviétique", 1959, 117, pp. 28-29.
- Cifre obiettivo* 1959: *Cifre obiettivo dello sviluppo dell'economia nazionale dell'URSS per il 1959-1965 approvate dal XXI Congresso del PCUS il 5 febbraio 1959*. (Sunto), Roma 1959.
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- Encore un pas* 1959: *Encore un pas*, "L'Union Soviétique", 1959, 112, pp. 16-19.

³⁴ See also: Bornstein 1964.

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- Lajf* 1957: *Lajfgovorit nepravdu*, "Ogonek", 1957, 21, pp. 26-31.
- Life International* 1959a: "Life International", July 6, 1959.
- Life International* 1959b: "Life International", October 26, 1959, pp. 44-59.
- Oblik* 1959: *Oblik socialističeskoj èpoxi*, "Ogonek", 1959, 28, p. 6.
- Ogonek* 1954a: "Ogonek", 1954, 4, fourth cover.
- Ogonek* 1954b: "Ogonek", 1954, 17, fourth cover.
- Ogonek* 1955: "Ogonek", 1955, 2, fourth cover.
- Ogonek* 1956: "Ogonek", 1956, 3, fourth cover.
- Ogonek* 1959a: "Ogonek", 1959, 33, p. 1.
- Ogonek* 1959b: "Ogonek", 1959, 39, p. 1.
- Ogonek* 1959c: "Ogonek", 1959, 40, inside cover.
- Rapporto* 1956: *Rapporto di Nikita Chruščëv* in: *XX Congresso del Partito Comunista dell'Unione Sovietica*, Roma 1956.
- RGAEa: Reklamy, plakaty i katalogi na bakalejnye tovary, èksponiruemye na mežrespublikanskoj optovoj vystavke v g. Moskve v 1959 godu, RGAE, f. 81, op. 1, d. 588.
- RGAEb: Centrosojuz SSSR, RGAE, f. 484, op. 19.
- RGAEc: Tematičeskij plan vystavki dostiženij SSSR v oblasti nauki, texniki i kul'tury v SŠA (g. N'ju-Jork) na 1959 g., RGAE, f. 635, op. 1, d. 389.
- RGAEd: Otzyvy posetitelej o sovetskoj vystavke v N'ju-Jorke (SŠA) Tom 1 (29.06-09.08 1959 g.), RGAE, f. 635, op. 2, d. 474.
- RGAEe: Otčet sotrudnikov Ministerstva trgovli SSSR o prebyvanii v SŠA dlja oznakomlenija s organizacej massovogo pitanija (31 okt. – 17 nojab. 1956), RGAE, f. 7971, op. 1, d. 2817.
- RGAEf: Otčet t. Kurnina D.N. o rezul'tatax komandirovki v Čexoslovakiyu s 27 po 31 avgusta, s priloženiem akta o soveščanii predstavitelej Ministr trgovli SSSR, GDR i ČSR po organizacii meždunarodnoj konferencii rabotnikov reklami, RGAE, f. 7971, op. 1, d. 2971.

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Abstract

Giovanni Moretto

Xruščev and 1959. Contesting Consumption in the Cold War

This article investigates an important battle-front of the Cold War: the competition on consumption. It focuses on the year 1959, year of the Soviet exhibition in New York, of the American exhibition in Moscow and of Xruščev's trip to the U.S., considering the Soviet attempts to develop alternative models of modernity. The "consumption contest" is here analyzed with a particular emphasis on the Soviet culture of consumption in its differences with the American one. The paper uses both official and popular Soviet sources as well as the American press when this helps to clarify the difference between Soviet and American propaganda attitudes, as well as archival documents from the RGAE (Russian State Archive of the Economy). As far as the popular press is concerned, here we have mostly used the Soviet weekly magazine "Ogonek" and the monthly "L'Union Soviétique". As regards popular American sources, the article takes into consideration the "Ogonek" counterpart "Life".

Keywords

Soviet Union; Consumption; Cold War.