

*THE AMERICAN
NATIONAL
EXHIBITION IN
MOSCOW, 1959:*

How the A.N.E.M. influenced the Cold War

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The so-called Kitchen Debate of 1959 between Richard M. Nixon and Nikita S. Khrushchev was a pivotal point in the Cold War. Held at the American National Exhibition in Sokolniki Park in Moscow, its official purpose was to promote the sharing of ideas regarding consumer technology between the two superpowers. Not limited to simple appliances, the event instigated the sharing of ideas. The Kitchen Debate highlighted many differences: cultural, political, and technological. While the popular narrative considers the American National Exhibition to have contributed greatly to the overall outcome of the Cold War, it clearly did not influence the conflict in the way that is commonly thought.

Background

The American National Exhibition was originally planned under a 1958 agreement, made between the United States and the Soviet Union, to hold expositions in each others' countries. A Soviet Exhibition was held in New York City's Coliseum and an American Exhibition was held in Sokolniki Park in Moscow. The intention of these expositions was to share ideas and show each others' populations what the other country was like.¹ This came at a time when the populations of the two nations knew little about their powerful adversaries. The Soviet Union and communism were taboo subjects in the United States, while conversely America and capitalism were taboo in the Soviet Union. Consequently, most people had little or no idea what life was actually like in either country. The American National Exhibition aimed to change this.

¹ 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, Fall 2008, p. 856.

In early 1959, President Eisenhower approved Vice President Richard Nixon to represent the United States at the exhibition after a recommendation by the United States Information Agency.² Just before Nixon left for Moscow, the U.S. Congress passed the Captive Nations Resolution, which dedicated every third week in July to raising awareness concerning countries that were under the control of communistic and other non-democratic regimes.³ This resolution caused great tension prior to, and during, Nixon's visit to the U.S.S.R., and it provided the subject of much of what Nixon and Khrushchev debated when away from the public eye.

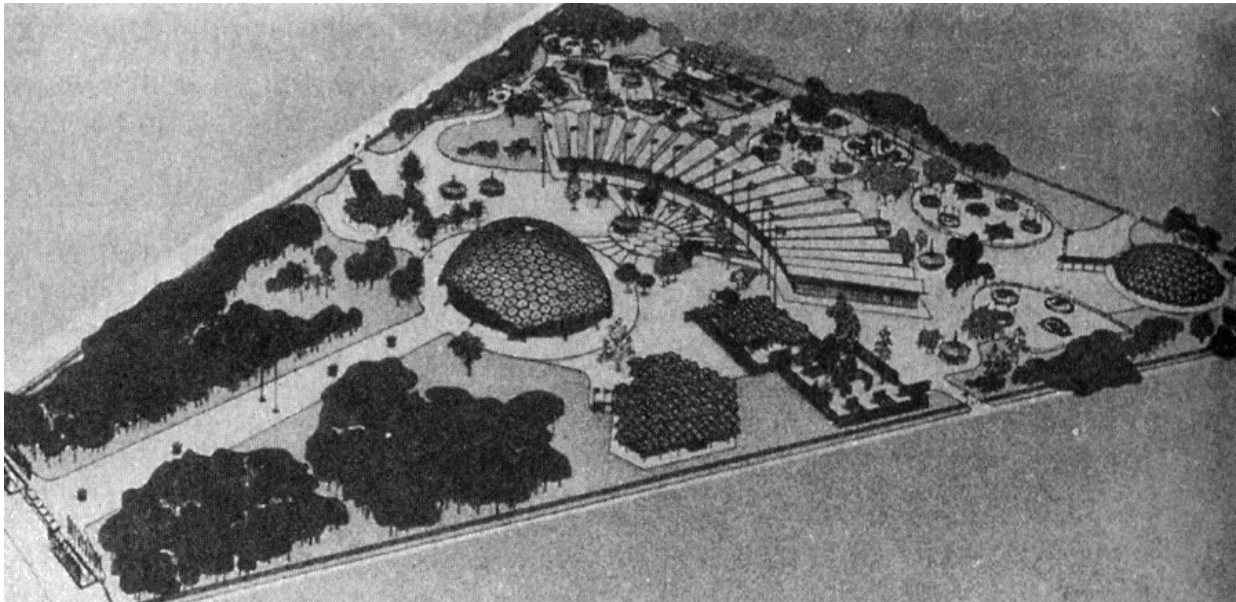


Figure 1: Map of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959⁴

The Exhibition itself included the latest-and-greatest technology and art, representing American "cutting-edge" culture. There was a model home, nicknamed

² Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Gossett & Dunlap, 1978), 203.

³ *Ibid*, 205.

⁴ Paleofuture, "Illustration of plans for the American National Exhibition in Sokolniki Park, Moscow," *The All-American Expo That Invaded Cold War Russia*, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/the-all-american-expo-that-invaded-cold-war-russia-550628823>.

“Splitnik” as a play off of the word “Sputnik.” This nickname derived because the structure was split in half to allow a large audience to view the interior. Inside, the yellow appliances of the General Electric kitchen created a bright, cheery background for the renowned Kitchen Debate. Adjacent to the house, a revolutionary color television studio provided the location where Nixon and Khrushchev would have their debate recorded on Ampex color videotape, later replayed on televisions throughout the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Separate from the house, there were three other kitchens, most notably a fully-automated Whirlpool “Miracle” kitchen designed to amaze Soviet and American audiences. Voting machines, demonstrated how American election processes worked on the individual level. These voting machines were used during the exhibition to collect data regarding Soviet reaction to the exhibits.⁵ An array of American art, including many sculptures, as well as a large selection of paintings and photographs rounded out the scene. These exhibits represented the diversity and creativity of modern American artists.

A particularly notable exhibit was a film entitled “Glimpses of the U.S.A.,” a slideshow-type film put together to show Soviets what an ordinary day for an average American family looked like. It contained images of wide-open prairies, densely wooded forests, mountains, urban metropolises, sprawling suburbs, and interstate highways; all presented to the tune of dramatic cinematic music with a narration that described a typical day in America. It really did capture the late 1950s U.S.A. quite well.⁶ The event organizers displayed the film on seven twenty-foot by thirty-foot screens inside another of the event’s main attractions, a 250-foot diameter geodesic dome, designed by distinguished architect

⁵ Reid, “Who will Beat Whom?,” 886.

⁶ Charles and Ray Eames, *Glimpses of the U.S.A. (1959) [excerpt]* (Eames Office, 1959), from YouTube, 4:23, <https://youtu.be/Ob0aSyDUK4A>

and inventor Buckminster Fuller.⁷ It took more than all this, however, to truly impress the Soviets.



Figure 2: "Glimpses of The U.S.A." being shown in the Geodesic Dome at the American National Exhibition, 1959.⁸

The Kitchen Debate

The most well-known events of the American National Exhibition were the debates between Nixon and Khrushchev in the model General Electric kitchen, hence the name

⁷ Eames Office, "Glimpses Of The U.S.A. Film," *The Work: Multiscreen & Multimedia*, accessed April 3, 2016, (Eames Office 1959).

⁸ Eames Office, "Out Of Many, One: Glimpses Of The U.S.A. And More," *Scholars Walk: Notable Articles*, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.eamesoffice.com/scholars-walk/out-of-many-one-glimpses-of-the-usa-and-more>.

“Kitchen Debate.” This was followed by a debate in the color television studio, which was broadcast in the United States and Soviet Union. These two events are often collectively referred to as “The Kitchen Debate” although only one of them actually took place in a kitchen. The two leaders discussed the superiority of each country in specific areas. In what was probably the most famous scene from the whole event, Nixon and Khrushchev walked into the the General Electric model kitchen and Nixon pointed at a dishwasher:

Khrushchev: We have such things.

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

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

Nixon: I think that this attitude towards women is universal. What we want to do, is make life more easy for our housewives....⁹

This scene became famous primarily because it highlighted a significant difference in attitude regarding the status and role of women within the cultures. Under Soviet tradition, women worked just as men did and were respected for their labor, whereas in this era in the United States, women were often not employed for meaningful work. Women in the U.S. were also a frequent target of advertisers, attempting to sell products to supposedly improve their lives.

In another instance, Nixon admitted that although the Soviet Union was ahead of the United States in rocket technology at the time, the U.S. had an upper-hand in consumer technologies, such as color television. The two had very lively interactions: jabbing, joking,

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency (FOIA), The Kitchen Debate – Transcript, July 24, 1959, (The History Channel n.d.)(accessed 2/20/16), p.1.

and debating throughout Nixon's time in the Soviet Union. Though much was said between the two leaders, the moments captured by audio and video technology have become the foundation for scholarly interpretation of the Kitchen Debate.



Figure 3: Khrushchev (left) and Nixon (right) in the General Electric model kitchen¹⁰

In the color television studio, the two men deliberated more over their countries' respective policies, trying in vain to answer a question that neither would agree on: which system was better? Each made valid points about the superiority of their own. When the topic of housing came up, Khrushchev argued that Soviets had a right to housing — that one only had to be born in the Soviet Union to receive housing. In jest, he contrasted this to the United States, claiming “if you don't have a dollar you have a right to choose between

¹⁰ The History Channel, “The Kitchen Debate Video,” *Richard M. Nixon Videos*, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/richard-m-nixon/videos/the-kitchen-debate>. (Khrushchev and Talbott 1974) (Frankel 1959)

sleeping in a house or on the pavement,” meaning if you were penniless, you had to sleep on the street. Nixon rebutted, claiming that there were “a thousand builders building a thousand different houses,” and that no single individual in the government made anyone’s decisions for them.¹¹ Khrushchev firmly convinced himself that, with the adoption of the 1960 five-year plan, the U.S.S.R. could catch up to the United States and eventually become superior, all thanks to the wonders of communism. He made it a point during the debate to share his confidence with the world.

Reception of The American National Exhibition

The American National Exhibition received mixed reviews. American news outlets reported that Nixon successfully debated his points and advocated peace between the powers. However, many sources collected from Soviet patrons to the exhibition revealed criticism of the event. The primary means of collecting information from the Soviets included a combination of voting machines that the event organizers used to record quantitative data regarding specific exhibits as “favorable” or “unfavorable,” as well as blank comment books that Soviets could write in. These sources, however, are not absolutely reliable due to so-called “agitators” present during the first few weeks of the event. The agitators confused American guides with bizarre questions, and left negative comments in the books with the hope that others would follow suit.¹²

¹¹ Central Intelligence Agency (FOIA), The Kitchen Debate – Transcript, July 24, 1959, p. 2.

¹² Reid, “Who will Beat Whom?,” 874.

The majority of the comments that Soviets wrote in the comment books were negative, often describing a feeling of “disappointment.”¹³ Many expected much more from the American exhibit. Some praises were accompanied by a criticism within the same comment. This was partly due to patrons’ tendencies to read previous comments in the books then formulate their own based upon them, and partly due to fear of seeming pro-American by Soviet secret police.

Based upon the data collected from the Soviet comment books (see Table 1), it is clear some exhibits proved very popular. American cars received frequent remarks as many Soviets quite liked the designs and features offered in U.S.-made vehicles not offered in Soviet cars. The tour guides were also, for the most part, viewed favorably. Yet, despite these positive notes, most comments remained negative. Soviets did not find the technology and machine-related exhibits as impressive as expected. A 1959 *New York Times* article stated “a great number of the Russians complained of an absence of technical marvels at work before their eyes.”¹⁴ Another very-common criticism related to technology was that many of the machines made simple tasks more complicated. Khrushchev himself criticized a lemon juicer to Nixon:

What a silly thing for your people to exhibit in the Soviet Union, Mr. Nixon! All you need for tea is a couple of drops of lemon juice. I think it would take a housewife longer to use this gadget than it would for her to do what our housewives do: slice a piece of lemon, drop it into a glass of tea, then squeeze a few drops out with a spoon. That's the way we always did it when I was a child, and I don't think this appliance of yours is an improvement in any way. It's not really a time-saver or a labor-saver at all. In

¹³ Ibid., 877.

¹⁴ Max Frankel, “U.S. Fair Derided By Soviet Press: Propaganda And Deception Alleged in New Attacks,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 1959.

fact, you can squeeze a lemon faster by hand. This kind of nonsense is an insult to our intelligence.¹⁵

Many Soviets shared the same sentiment regarding these time and labor saving devices.

Simpler, better ways to do the same task existed that did not involve an expensive gadget.

This held true for many of the devices showcased in the American exhibit.

One of the other items criticized even more harshly by Soviets were the art exhibits.

Many Soviets thought the art was too risqué, too vulgar, and often just inappropriate. One

of the most hotly contested aspects of the art exhibit was how it portrayed women. In this

regard, Khrushchev had a particular issue:

There were a lot of paintings and pieces of sculpture in a style which the Americans consider modernism. Most of these didn't impress me much. In fact, I found them revolting. Some of them were downright perverted. I was especially upset by one statue of a woman. I'm simply not eloquent enough to express in words how disgusting it was. It was a monster-woman, all out of proportion, with a huge behind and grotesque in every other way.... How would this sculptor's mother feel to see how he depicts a woman? He must be abnormal in some way, a pervert or a pederast. No man who loves life and nature, who loves women, could depict a female this way!"¹⁶

Many Soviets agreed with this sentiment. American art simply did not sit well with them. At

least five people—including Khrushchev—specifically commented on that sculpture

unfavorably in the Soviet comment books (see Table 1).

One of the other problematic aspects discussed by Soviet patrons was the

overall confusing nature of the exhibition. It lacked signage or organization which many

Soviets did not appreciate. Soviets expressed a desire for more organization, signs, and

¹⁵ Nikita S. Khrushchev and Strobe Talbott, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1974), 365.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 364-365.

descriptions of each item.¹⁷ Despite the harsh criticism, it is incorrect to call the American National Exhibition a failure. It did influence the Cold War, but not in the way many think.

Table 1: Quantified Breakdown of Comments on Specific Exhibits in Visitors' Books for the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959¹⁸

Category	Favorable	Unfavorable
Cars	71	—
Family of Man	28	2
Guides	26	8
Circarama	19	—
Consumer Goods	16	—
Color TV	14	—
Miracle Kitchen	11	2
Model House	8	2
Art	7	37 + 5 (sculpture)
Organization of Exhibit (crowd control, signs, visibility, etc.)	5	19 + 2 (lack of signs)
Books	4	—
Machines & Technology	6	82 (lack of science & technology)
Voting Machines	3	2
Fashions	3	—
Geodesic Dome	3	—
Sports	3	—
Music	2	—
Pepsi-Cola	2	—
Architecture	2	—
Furniture	2	—
Toys	—	9

¹⁷ Frankel, "U.S. Fair Derided By Soviet Press".

¹⁸ Reid, "Who will Beat Whom?," 872.

The Impact of the American National Exhibition

U.S.-Soviet relations during the American National Exhibition reached a new milestone. The Kitchen Debate certainly showcased major differences in a relatively short amount of time. What made the debate significant in the grand scheme of the Cold War is that it was really the first time a leader from the United States and the leader from the Soviet Union met face-to-face and deliberated policy matters. It was also the first recording of such a debate on color videotape, which both governments translated and broadcast internationally. Seeing two high-ranking officials of two of the most powerful nations on earth jabbing at each other, interrupting one another, and telling jokes served to humanize them both. It showed both Americans and Soviets that, despite political and ideological differences, we are all human. Khrushchev and Nixon both handled themselves very well, especially given that they knew the world was watching. Nixon tried to incite peace by showing the Soviets that by converting their production from military purposes into consumer goods that they too could live like Americans. Khrushchev responded to these assertions by arguing that capitalism breeds corruption and oppression. In the end, the two men agreed to start a dialogue in order to share ideas and culture, to coexist rather than to try to overtake one another.

In terms of the rest of the exhibition, for the most part, Soviets did not believe Americans lived in the way the American National Exhibition portrayed them. Many Soviets doubted Nixon's claim that an average steel worker could comfortably afford a house such as the exhibit home making only ninety dollars a week. Even if they overcame that, many

took issue with the supposed poor quality of the structure and felt that, while it might be alright for the Russian summer, it would not stand a chance in Russian winter.¹⁹

While the Soviets outwardly scoffed at the over-complicated American goods, a subtle image of what life *could* be like was inserted into the minds of everyone who attended the exhibition. This led to a very-gradual increase in desire for things Americans had. While there is no quantitative data to reflect consumer demand itself, data showing the types and quantities of goods owned by Soviet families over time, as well as the quantity of specific goods produced by the Soviet Union do exist. Using televisions — including black and white as well as color — as a standard consumer product, an analysis of demand can be undertaken. In 1970, the Soviet Union produced 6,682,000 televisions. That same year, the United States produced 9,368,000 televisions. Seventeen years later, in 1987, the U.S.S.R. produced 9,081,000 televisions, while the U.S. produced 23,280,000.²⁰ Over a seventeen year span, Soviet production of televisions increased by 2,399,000 units, while the U.S. increased its production by 13,912,000 units. In addition, in 1980, 249 out of 1,000 Soviets owned a television. Nine years later, in 1989, that number grew to 316 out of 1,000.²¹ It is clear that both production and consumption gradually increased over time, and this must have been caused by an increase in demand.

While the Soviets' initial response to the American National Exhibition was rather negative, the exhibition influenced the Cold War in long-term, indirect ways. The exhibition was most influential in introducing new ideas. At first, the ideas of capitalism and

¹⁹ Frankel, "U.S. Fair Derided By Soviet Press".

²⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, *USA/USSR Facts and Figures*, August 1991, <https://www.census.gov/population/international/files/USSR.pdf>, 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

consumerism seemed laughable and inconceivable to Soviets who had long been accustomed to the ways of socialism. Soviets viewed many of the goods displayed at the exhibition as science fiction at first. Real change only began to take place around a decade later when the Soviet Union began trading with Western Europe and the United States. Though consumer demand did not skyrocket from the get-go like so many Americans hoped, it gradually increased after World War II until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The 1959 exhibition influenced the gradual demise of the Soviet Union by showing the Soviets what was possible, and what their lives could be like if they focused more on consumer manufacturing and less on the military.

A direct correlation between the exhibition and consumer demand is difficult to establish due to a lack of hard data. Between the end of World War II and the exhibition fifteen years later, consumer demand increased, but not as fast as after the exhibition. It had at least some influence. The evidence lies in the production of consumer goods and the number of Soviets who owned these goods over time. Before the exhibition, relatively few Soviets had experience with, or access to, western goods. After the exhibition, consumer goods slowly became more commonplace. By the 1970s, people purchased consumer commodities like televisions, cars, Western-style clothing, stereos, and other things Americans had in nearly every home. In a sense, it took a decade after the exhibition for the Soviet Union to begin to achieve the same level of production as the United States, and even into the late 1980s, it still had not caught up fully. Even with the introduction of consumer goods, the centralized economic planning was far too inefficient to keep up with fluctuating demand. It would require a conversion to capitalist practices to provide Soviet consumers with the products they desired. With that conversion came the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The American National Exhibition in Moscow of 1959 showcased the latest and greatest of American ingenuity, despite the fact that much of it was not available to Americans at the time. The point of the exhibition was to show the Soviet Union what the United States could do. By featuring a modern house, cars, appliances, whole kitchens, art, and ideas, it gave many Soviets a “too good to be true” type of first impression. Many Soviets doubted the legitimacy of the guides and the exhibits, partially due to Soviet propaganda, partially due to fear of being thought of as pro-American. In the short term, the exhibition had little effect on the Cold War: it simply built diplomatic relations. It opened dialogue between the United States and the U.S.S.R., but real change did not occur until nearly a decade later when consumer goods became more commonplace. Did the American National Exhibition cause the collapse of the Soviet Union? In a word, no. However, it did sow the seeds of consumerist dissent that blossomed in the mid 1970s and came to full fruition by the late 1980s. The Soviet Union would have collapsed regardless, for a variety of different reasons, but the American National Exhibition likely served to speed up the process at the very least.

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