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## **Three oranges stolen three times: Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's forgotten American projects and his collaboration with Victor Seroff**

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### **Abstract**

This essay explores correspondence between two people: the world-famous Russian-born theater director Fyodor Fyodorovich Komissarzhevsky (Theodor Komisarjevsky) and an aspiring Russian émigré non-fiction writer Victor Ilyich Seroff. Their correspondence, held by the Houghton Library at Harvard University and dating from 1947-1950, provides a valuable tool for reconstructing the story behind this forgotten production of Sergey Prokofiev's opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, at the New York City Opera in 1949 and several unrealized projects of the director. This intriguing story also reveals the evolution of the relationship between these two Russian-born European émigrés who settled in the United States in the 1930s—tracing the trajectory from friendship to confrontation. Although most of the surviving letters were sent from Seroff to Komissarzhevsky (and only one response from the director has been preserved), it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct the development of their collaboration based on the available material.

## **Three oranges stolen three times: Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's forgotten American projects and his collaboration with Victor Seroff**

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Sergey Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, written and premiered in the USA in 1921 in Chicago, was restaged on an American stage for the second time only more than twenty years later, in 1949. On this occasion, the venue was the New York City Opera – an ambitious theatrical project dedicated to popularizing classical opera among a broad public. The production was the work of three key figures: two Russian-born European émigrés – Fyodor Komissarzhevsky (Theodor Komisarjevsky) and Victor Seroff, and the American conductor Laszlo Halasz, of Hungarian birth. Despite the opera's popularity during seven seasons, it soon fell into obscurity in the United States for nearly six decades. Scholarly attention to the circumstances of its creation has emerged only recently. The correspondence found at the Houghton Library at Harvard University sheds new light on the intrigues surrounding this iconic production and provides rich material for analyzing the theatrical traditions employed by the world-famous director Fyodor Komissarzhevsky who was invited to stage this opera.

Fyodor Komissarzhevsky (1882-1954), the son of an opera singer and the brother of beloved Russian actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya, played an active role in the theatrical innovations that emerged in Russia in the early twentieth century. He fled Soviet Russia in 1919, worked in Europe staging Russian and European classics as well as operas, and lived in England until 1939, when he moved to the USA.

Victor Seroff (1902-1979) also fled Russia in 1919, leaving his hometown Batoum (Batumi) on the last ship to Constantinople before the Bolshevik invasion. He also lived in Europe: in Austria, Germany, and France before eventually moving to the USA.

How these two people met and started their work on Prokofiev's opera is not known, but eventually their joint project was realized, premiering on November 1 and 2, 1949.

In the only existing biography of Komissarzhevsky, written by theatre scholar Victor Borovsky, the American period of the director's life is presented rather briefly, although the book covers both the Russian and British periods in great detail. Despite the fact that the author includes numerous fragments from

his unique interviews with Komissarzhevsky's widow, the American dancer Ernestine Stodelle, some of the projects the director worked on in the USA are not mentioned at all. Nor does the biography mention one of Komissarzhevsky's correspondents, whose letters the author of this article discovered in the Houghton Library at Harvard University.<sup>1</sup> Among this correspondence is the only letter by Fyodor Fyodorovich himself—though it is quite short and purely formal, suggesting that their communication shifted from friendly to official, and then, apparently, ceased.

The correspondence raises more questions than it answers, so I must clarify upfront that researchers still have much work to do in uncovering these stories in full. The correspondence revolves around two (or possibly three) joint projects, in which Komissarzhevsky was one of the participants.

Although some of the director's extensive correspondence has been found and partially published in Russia,<sup>2</sup> these particular letters were not included in these publications. They have never been released in English either.

<sup>1</sup> The Houghton Library. The Harvard Theatre Collection, bMS Thr 490 (91) – (179). Theodor Komissarzhevsky, 1882-1954. Papers 1912-1970. Box 2 of 27; bMS Thr 490 (154) Seroff Victor Ilyich, 1902 – Correspondence with Theodor Komissarzhevsky, 1949-1950, 1 folder. Ernestine Stodelle Chamberlain, 1957-1993/ \*92-93.076.02

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Komissarzhevskii, *Ia i Teatr (Myself and the Theatre) - Memuary, Dnevnik, Pis'ma (Memoirs, Diaries, Letters) (Perepiska F. F. Komissarzhevskogo — Correspondence of F. F. Komissarzhevskii) / Perevod I. L. Alpatovoi (Translated by I. L. Alpatova)*. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1999; *Kanva sud'by. F. F. Komissarzhevskii. Avtobiografiia. (The Canvas of Fate. F. F. Komissarzhevskii. Autobiography)*. Prilozhenie: *Pis'ma F. F. Komissarzhevskogo K. S. Stanislavskomu (1910-1915) (Appendix: Letters of F. F. Komissarzhevskii to K. S. Stanislavskii (1910-1915)) / Publ., vstup. stat'ia i komment. M. V. Khalizevoi (Publication, introductory article, and commentary by M. V. Khalizeva) // Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka (Mnemosyne. Documents and Facts from the History of Russian Theatre of the 20th Century) / Red.-sost. V. V. Ivanov (Ed.-comp. V. V. Ivanov)*. Moscow: Indrik, 2014. Issue 5. pp. 792–820; *Khronika nesostoiavshegosia vozvrashcheniia. F. F. Komissarzhevskii—E. K. Malinovskaia: pis'ma 1917—1934. (Chronicle of an Unfulfilled Return. F. F. Komissarzhevskii—E. K. Malinovskaia: Letters, 1917–1934)*. Prilozhenie: *Pis'mo N. Ia. Beresneva F. F. Komissarzhevskomu (1924) (Appendix: Letter of N. Ia. Beresnev to F. F. Komissarzhevskii (1924)) / Publ., vstupit. stat'ia i komment. V. V. Ivanova (Publication, introductory article, and commentary by V. V. Ivanov) // Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*. Moscow: Indrik, 2019. pp. 369–418; «Velikii gertsog bez trona, bez rodiny i bez deneg». (“A Grand Duke Without a Throne, Without a Homeland, and Without Money”). *Pis'ma F. F. Komissarzhevskogo k M. A. Benua 1930-kh godov (Letters of F. F. Komissarzhevskii to M. A. Benois from the 1930s) / Publ., vstupit. stat'ia i komment. M. V. Khalizevoi (Publication, introductory article, and commentary by M. V. Khalizeva) // Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*. Moscow: Indrik, 2019. pp. 419–458; *Gorestnyi epistolarii. Pis'ma F. F. Komissarzhevskogo V. G. Sakhnovskomu, O. D. Kamenevoi, A. V. Lunacharskomu i dr. 1915—1919 (The Sorrowful Epistolary. Letters of F. F. Komissarzhevskii to V. G. Sakhnovskii, O. D. Kameneva, A. V. Lunacharskii, and others, 1915–1919) / Publ., vstupit. stat'ia i komment. V. V. Ivanova (Publication, introductory article, and commentary by V. V. Ivanov) // Mnemosina. Dokumenty i fakty iz istorii otechestvennogo teatra XX veka*. Vyp. 4 / Red.-sost. V. V. Ivanov (Issue 4 / Ed.-comp. V. V. Ivanov). Moscow: Indrik, 2009. pp. 324–351

While Komissarzhevsky's correspondent and co-author is less known, readers interested in the life and work of the American dancer Isadora Duncan may remember him being mentioned in all of her biographies—specifically those by Frederika Blair and Peter Kurth. Scholars of music might have read more than a dozen of Russian and European composers' biographies written by him and published in the USA, and in translation—in France and Germany. His name is Victor Seroff, and although he is referred to only as a musician in Duncan's biographies (he was indeed a musician in the 1920s), he later changed his occupation and became a well-known American non-fiction writer in the 1950-1970s. There is even his own biography, written by American journalist Morris Werner and published in 1931 in the USA.<sup>3</sup>

Seroff penned biographies of Shostakovich (1943), Rachmaninoff (1950), Ravel (1953), Debussy (1956), soprano Renata Tebaldi (1961), Chopin (1964), Mozart (1965), Liszt (1966), Berlioz (1967), Prokofiev (1968), Mussorgsky (1968), as well as a book titled *Common Sense in Piano Teaching*.<sup>4</sup> His book on *The Mighty Five*, published in English in 1948, was later translated into German and French.<sup>5</sup> In 1971, having fully mastered the craft of biographical writing, Seroff wrote and published a biography of Isadora Duncan, with whom he had been in close relationships during the last years of her life in France.<sup>6</sup>

Victor Seroff lived in New York from the late 1930s, having moved there from Paris, France.<sup>7</sup> Komissarzhevsky relocated from Great Britain to the USA

<sup>3</sup> M. R. Werner, *To Whom It May Concern: The Story of Victor Ilyitch Seroff*. (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1931).

<sup>4</sup> Victor Seroff, *Franz Liszt*. Freeport, NY : Books for Libraries Press, [1970, c1966]; Victor Seroff, *Renata Tebaldi, The Woman and the Diva*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1970, c1961]; Victor Seroff, *Hector Berlioz* ( New York : Macmillan Co., 1967); Victor Seroff, *Frederic Chopin* (New York : Macmillan Co.,1964); Victor Seroff, *Mighty Five : The Cradle of Russian National Music* (New York: Allen, Towne & Heath, 1948); Victor Seroff, *Debussy : Musician of France*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, [1970, c1958]; Victor Seroff, *Maurice Ravel* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1970, c1953]); Victor Seroff, *Modeste Moussorgsky* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls, 1968); Victor Seroff, *Dmitri Shostakovich; the Life and Background of a Soviet Composer, by Victor Ilyich Seroff, in collaboration with Nadejda Galli-Shohat* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press [1970, c1943]); Victor Seroff, *Sergei Prokofiev ; A Soviet Tragedy : The Case of Sergei Prokofiev, His Life & Work, His Critics, and His Executioners* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls, 1968); Victor Seroff, *Common Sense in Piano Study* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls,1970); Victor Seroff, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (New York : Macmillan Co., 1965); Victor Seroff, *Debussy; Musician of France* (New York : Putnam,1956); Victor Seroff, *Rachmaninoff* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1950); Victor Seroff, *Men Who Made Musical History* (New York : Funk & Wagnalls, 1969); Victor Seroff, *Frederic Chopin* ( New York: Macmillan Co., 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Victor Seroff, *Groupe des cinq: Balakirev, Borodine, Moussorgsky, César Cui, Rimsky-Korsakoff; les héros de la musique russe, traduction française d'André Vaudoyer* (Paris : Éditions Le Bon Plaisir, 1949); Victor Seroff, *Mächtige Häuflein : der Ursprung der russischen Nationalmusik* (Zürich ; Freiburg i. Br. : Atlantis Verlag, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Victor Seroff, *The Real Isadora* (New York: Dial Press, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> The exact date of his move to the USA is unknown, but the Duncan dancer Jeanne Breschiani, director of the Isadora Duncan International Institute, thinks it was 1936—email to the author, April 3, 2022. Dr. Breschiani met Seroff in 1976 for cataloging Isadora Duncan's library which he brought from France – see Breschiani, Jeanne. “A Catalog of the

before World War II (by 1936 he had already been living between two countries). In America, he started to teach at Yale University and continued to direct—staging theater plays with his students. But it brought him no satisfaction and felt like a major step backward compared to what he had achieved in England: a reputation as a first-class director, his own theatre, and an enthusiastic fan base, including artists such as John Gielgud,<sup>8</sup> who highly valued Komissarzhevsky's methods and actor training system. Fyodor Fyodorovich constantly longed to return to England, but during his wartime absence, the theatre scene there changed, and his talents were no longer in demand.

Where and when Seroff and Komissarzhevsky first met is unknown, but according to Jeanne Bresciani, Seroff was in contact with Ernestine Stodelle, the director's last wife (although their friendship may have begun later). Stodelle, being a dancer, studied the techniques of Isadora Duncan, as evidenced by the program of her March 25, 1939, performance in Paris, reproduced in Borovsky's biography—the concert opened with a number titled "*Hommage à Isadora Duncan*."<sup>9</sup>

The correspondence stored in the Harvard archive is dated 1949–1950, though it is likely that some letters were written earlier, in 1947–48—this hypothesis is partially supported by Komissarzhevsky's biography. As for Seroff's own biography, it still remains riddled with gaps and awaits a dedicated researcher.

In July 1949, Komissarzhevsky finally left the USA for England, where his pre-war career had flourished and where he had longed to return for over a decade. From the letters excerpted in Borovsky's biography, it is evident that the director was willing to do any job necessary during the war—if only the British would bring him over by military aircraft or send an official invitation so he could buy a commercial ticket—just to escape America, where everything irritated him.<sup>10</sup> When he returned on September 1, 1949, after a largely fruitless trip, he was almost immediately hospitalized with a heart attack and underwent a long recovery. His illness prevented him from completing a production of Sergei Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* at the New York City Opera. This project is not mentioned at all in Borovsky's biography, likely because the production was completed by another director—Vladimir Rosing.<sup>11</sup>

The New York City Opera was not a typical theatre. It was established in July 1943 as part of the City Center of Music and Drama, to popularize opera among mass audiences.<sup>12</sup> Unlike at the elite Metropolitan Opera, ticket prices

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Isadora Duncan Library in the Victor Seroff Collection." Unpublished MA thesis. New York University, 1982. Information on Jeanne Bresciani—<https://www.idii.org/>—accessed December 19, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Arthur John Gielgud (1904–2000) – English actor and theater director.

<sup>9</sup> Borovsky – ill. between p. 428 and 429

<sup>10</sup> Borovsky, p. 433

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Rosing (1890–1963) was a Russian chamber singer (tenor), opera performer, stage director and musical theater producer, as well as a musical and public figure, whose professional and creative career developed primarily in England and the United States.

<sup>12</sup> See—Martin L. Sokol, *The New York City Opera: An American Adventure* (New York: Macmillan Collier, 1981).

were affordable, and operas were often performed in English translation. Its first musical director was Hungarian American conductor Laszlo Halasz, who held the post until 1951. His policies emphasized unusual repertoire, support of young singers, an ability to navigate financial challenges, and sometimes alienating performers and staff.<sup>13</sup>

One of the unusual operas he selected was *The Love for Three Oranges* by Sergei Prokofiev. It had not been performed in the U.S. for over twenty years, although the composer had written it there in 1919 for the Chicago Opera Association, which staged it in 1921— a few years before its premieres in Moscow and Leningrad.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Prokofiev's *March* and *Scherzo* from the opera became popular in the USA independently of the opera—the *March* was even used as the theme for the popular radio crime drama *The FBI in Peace and War*.<sup>15</sup> Because the opera was initially poorly received—due to its eccentricity, unfamiliarity of American audiences with Italian commedia dell'arte, and other reasons<sup>16</sup>—no opera companies in the USA showed further interest in it until Halasz took notice.

Victor Seroff, musician and aspiring writer, author of books on Shostakovich (1943), *The Mighty Five* (1948) and forthcoming biography of Rachmaninov (1950), was invited to translate the libretto, originally written by the composer and based on a fairy tale by Carlo Gozzi. In the program for the production, stored in the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library, the production team is listed: Laszlo Halasz as artistic and musical director, music by Sergei Prokofiev, English translation by Victor Seroff, prologue based on Gozzi's text by T.K. (i.e. Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, known in England as Theodore), and conductor Laszlo Halasz. It is noted that the production was Komissarzhevsky's idea, but the director was Vladimir Rosing, with John Primm as assistant director. Sets, costumes, and masks were by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky,<sup>17</sup> choreography by Charles Weidman,<sup>18</sup> masks made by Yuji Ito and Michael Arshansky.<sup>19</sup>

The premiere took place on November 1 and 2, 1949, at the New York

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<sup>13</sup> See the obituary in New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/arts/laszlo-halasz-first-director-of-city-opera-is-dead-at-96.html>. Halasz was selected for the position of Music Director of City Center from among 63 candidates – see Sokol, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Tristan Paré-Morin, (2012) "Finding Harmony in Times of Hardship: Prokofiev's War and Peace," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*: v. 5, no. 1, (2012): 35.

<sup>15</sup> Sokol, 66

<sup>16</sup> Examining these factors is beyond the scope of the present article; they are analyzed in detail by an American scholar—Michael V. Pisani, "A Kapustnik" in the American Opera House: Modernism and Prokofiev's "Love for Three Oranges". *The Musical Quarterly*, Winter, 1997, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Winter, 1997): 487-515.

<sup>17</sup> Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875-1957)—a Russian Lithuanian artist, member of the group Mir Iskusstva (World of Art). In the 1920s he immigrated to Europe, later moved to the USA.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Weidman (1901-1975) – dancer, teacher and choreographer, one of the pioneers of modern dance in America.

<sup>19</sup> See -<https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=18126&recCount=25&recPointer=35&bibId=16520647>

City Center of Music and Drama (or simply “City Center,” as it was commonly known)—the initial venue of the new opera company. The premiere was originally scheduled for October 27 but was postponed due to Komissarzhevsky’s illness.<sup>20</sup> The opera remained successfully in the repertoire until 1955. In the *Annals: 1944–1981* section of Martin Sokol’s monograph on the history of the New York City Opera, all production programs are listed, showing that after three initial performances in 1949, there were ten in 1950, eight in 1951, three in 1952 (after Halasz left), and two each in 1953, 1954, and 1955.<sup>21</sup> In some programs from 1950–1954, Komissarzhevsky is not mentioned, and David Thornton is listed as the author of the prologue; later, Komissarzhevsky reappears, only to be replaced again by Thornton. The two names alternate unpredictably, but Victor Seroff is always credited as the translator.

The libretto was published immediately in 1949, with no mention of Komissarzhevsky—not even as the originator of the concept. The listed authors were Carlo Gozzi, Sergei Prokofiev, and Victor Seroff.<sup>22</sup> However, a review in *Musical America* dated November 15, 1949, opens with a mention of the Russian director. The reviewer, Quintans Eaton, repeatedly emphasizes Komissarzhevsky’s vital role in the production. He states that two Russian émigrés (the second one was artist Dobuzhinsky)—were invited to adapt the libretto. Both were deeply familiar with the cultural context in which the original concept had emerged, a concept born out of Prokofiev’s collaboration with Meyerhold and the theatrical experiments of the pre-revolutionary years. As musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker notes, “In the case of Prokofiev, the connection with Meyerhold is evident even in the title of his celebrated anti-opera, since it was Meyerhold who rediscovered Carlo Gozzi’s fable, adapted and then published it as a kind of manifesto piece in the first issue of his journal, in 1914; Meyerhold went so far as to call the journal *The Love for Three Oranges*. Although this was short-lived, and the play itself was never staged by Meyerhold, the idea of appropriating commedia dell’arte principles in the struggle against the naturalist theatre of Stanislavsky became for a time a central strategy in the practices of Meyerhold and his followers.”<sup>23</sup>

Eaton provides a detailed prehistory of the production in the United States, beginning with the commissioning of the opera to Prokofiev and its early performances not only in Chicago (where it was a complete failure and received rather harsh reviews in the press)<sup>24</sup> but also in New York on February 14, 1922, and concluding with a description of the surviving costumes that Halasz brought

<sup>20</sup> See—Eaton Quaintance. “The love for three oranges newly staged at City Center,” *Musical America* (November 15, 1949), p. 3,5.

<sup>21</sup> *Annals 1944-1981*, in Sokol, 253-293.

<sup>22</sup> *The love for three oranges*; after Carlo Gozzi’s comedy. An opera in four acts. Libretto; free adaptation and translation by Victor Seroff. New York, Boosey & Hawkes, 1949.

<sup>23</sup> M. Frolova-Walker, “Russian Opera Between Modernism and Romanticism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*. Ed. Marvyn Cook. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005), 181-197, 182.

<sup>24</sup> See Edward Moore. “Love for three oranges” color marvel, but enigmatic noise. *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1921—<https://chicagology.com/opera/loveforthreeoranges/>

for the revival of the opera (the stage designer in 1921 was also the Russian émigré artist Boris Anisfeld). The opera, incidentally, was originally performed in French, although the translation was made by Seroff from Russian.

His article contained many interesting and valuable observations about the production. Main ideas of the author were:

1. The production of Prokofiev's opera, revived in New York and Chicago, was a fortunate find with original scores and costumes discovered in a Chicago warehouse. Directed and designed by Russians familiar with the traditions of Russian pre-revolutionary theater, the opera was adapted with some cuts and changes but kept its original spirit and satire. The English libretto, translated by Victor Seroff, retains some awkwardness but fits the opera's fantastical story, which pokes fun at opera tropes, politics, magic, and romance.
2. The staging and choreography faced challenges, including limited rehearsals, last-minute adjustments, and technical difficulties, but the production succeeded through creative solutions and strong performances. Highlights include the humor of the Royal Cook, the Prince's comic hypochondria, and the vivid characterizations enhanced by skillful direction.
3. The music cleverly references classical composers and the opera world, enriching the satire. Despite some rough edges, the company's effort was praised, and the production was well-received, even prompting an extra matinee popular with both children and adults.

The reviewer then examines in detail all the nuances of the production, comparing it with rehearsals and with the Moscow staging he had seen in 1927. He analyzes the music, costumes, sets, lighting, stage machinery, props (the oranges, delivered literally at the last moment), and the singers' performances, and concludes that the production truly turned out to be outstanding, although the ballet component was less successful, despite Weidman's efforts. Eaton confirms that Rosing developed Komissarzhevsky's plan and followed his original outlines – "Mr. Rosing labored valiantly to carry out the ideas of his confrere, already implicit in the completed and nearly completed settings."<sup>25</sup>

The score itself receives special praise. "How fantastic, indeed, is the whole web of this score. At each hearing, it turns up new riches of inventiveness, rhythmic subtleties, and rainbow colors. It is as insinuating as a slow wink; as savage as a whiplash. The performance by the orchestra of 68, the largest ever used for an opera in the City Center, was one of the vital elements in the success of the work, and Mr. Halasz's congeniality to the music was evident,"<sup>26</sup> notes Eaton. Emphasizing the satirical character of Prokofiev's music, he finds its allusions to Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Wagner, and even *La Traviata*, inserted by the composer with a sly squint.

Marina Frolova-Walker characterizes the modernist nature of the opera as follows: the fragmentary nature of the music and its deliberately anti-Wagnerian

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<sup>25</sup> Eaton, 3.

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character, the eclectic vocal style, including humorous references to operatic clichés. “Both on the musical and the dramatic level, the opera is therefore a Meyerholdian ‘montage of attractions’ (‘attractions’ in the fairground or circus sense; this is film director Sergei Eisenstein’s term). The attractions are of extremely varied nature but always deliberately superficial: we may chuckle at the list of illnesses enunciated by the doctors in unpunctuated, unmetred quavers, at the chorus of little devils that reminds us of five-finger exercises, at Chelio, who exhibits Rimsky-Korsakov’s octatonicism taken to an extreme, at the cross-dressed Cook (echoing another cross-dressing cook in Stravinsky’s *Mavra*), or at the total absurdity of the situation with the oranges and dead princesses when the narrative veers off the road and has to be salvaged by an extraordinary intervention of the ‘audience’. These chuckles, however, seem rather weak when compared to the ‘programmed’ audience responses to which both Meyerhold and Eisenstein aspired.”<sup>27</sup>

As we can see, the deep understanding of Meyerhold’s ideas, despite many disagreements between him and young Komissarzhevsky, and Fyodor’s active participation in the creation of the new Russian theater before the 1917 October Revolution helped him realize a vivid experimental production several decades later in the United States.

*Commedia dell’arte*, which became an integral part of the theatrical process in Russia in the 1910s, attracted Komissarzhevsky throughout his career.<sup>28</sup> Although contemporary scholars have concluded that this genre appeared in Russia long before the Silver Age, no one disputes the fact that the flowering of Italian mask comedy occurred in the 1900s–1910s. Meyerhold, who actively promoted this genre, undoubtedly influenced the young director, although Fyodor Fyodorovich rejected much of his senior colleague’s theatrical experimentation, as he repeatedly noted in his articles and books. Komissarzhevsky’s staging of Moliere’s comedy *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (The Middle-Class Aristocrat) at the Nezlobin Theatre in 1911 was his first experience in this genre.<sup>29</sup> It was followed by *Princess Turandot* in 1912,<sup>30</sup> Beaumarchais’s *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* at the Maly Theatre in 1913,<sup>31</sup> and other productions drawing on Italian mask comedy. However, Vladimir Solovyov, a specialist in *commedia dell’arte* and an associate of Meyerhold, was skeptical about Komissarzhevsky’s

<sup>27</sup> Frolova-Walker, 182-183

<sup>28</sup> On *commedia dell’arte* in Russia see: Olga Partan, *Vagabonding Masks. The Italian Commedia dell’Arte in the Russian Artistic Imagination* (Academic Studies Press, 2017). The topic is more widely covered in Russian: V.A. Shcherbakov, *Pantomimy Serebriannogo veka (Pantomimes of the Silver Age)* ( St. Petersburg: *Peterburgskii teatral’nyi zhurnal*, 2014; V. A. Shcherbakov, “Russkii mif o Commedia dell’Arte. Prolog” (“The Russian Myth of Commedia dell’Arte. Prologue”) *Voprosy teatra. Proscenium (Theatre Studies. Proscenium)* 3-4, (2019): 252–273; Elena Yushkova, *Plastika preodoleniia (The Plastique of Overcoming)*. Yaroslavl: YaGPU (Yaroslavl: Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University, 2009)

<sup>29</sup> I. Alpatova, *Vechnoe vo vremennom – Komissarzhevskii. Ia i teatr (The Eternal in the Temporal—Komissarzhevskii. Myself and the Theatre)*. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1999), 22–24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

explorations in this genre, believing that the novice director had replaced Gozzi's "theatre of marvels" with "psychology" and "verisimilitude."<sup>32</sup>

The idea of staging Carlo Gozzi's fairy tale *The Love for Three Oranges* arose in the circle of Meyerhold and his associates, Vladimir Solovyov and Konstantin Vogak. They wrote their own "divertissement" based on the eighteenth-century Italian playwright's play and published it in Meyerhold's journal of the same name in 1914.<sup>33</sup> "Although this journal existed only briefly and the play itself was never staged by Meyerhold, the idea of borrowing the principles of commedia dell'arte in the struggle against Stanislavsky's naturalistic theater for a time became a central strategy in the practice of Meyerhold himself and his followers."<sup>34</sup> In 1917, Meyerhold attempted to draw Prokofiev's attention to the text by handing the composer a copy of the journal and even shared his idea of the possibility of writing an opera—an idea he had been nurturing since 1913.

Russian scholar Julia Galanina, based on numerous archival documents, reconstructs in detail the history of the opera's creation, beginning with Meyerhold's recommendation that Prokofiev take up this subject—the composer wrote about it in his diaries. In 1918, having left Russia, Prokofiev began working on the opera; that same year he entered negotiations with the Chicago Opera Association. Having decided to rework the plot he completely "forgot" to mention Meyerhold, referring to only a single author—Carlo Gozzi, whom he read in the original provided by Alexandre Benois.<sup>35</sup> The reaction of Meyerhold and his colleagues to the Chicago performance of 1921 and to the absence of their names on the program is unknown, but after the productions of 1926–1927 in the Soviet Union the co-authors were not merely outraged but even initiated legal action against Prokofiev. Letters discovered by Julia Galanina in several Russian archives vividly reflect the indignation of Meyerhold and Solovyov, as well as their consultations with lawyers and detailed analyses of specific borrowings. However, since the opera was published in Germany and Prokofiev did not return to the USSR until 1936, the proceedings ended with no result, and the copyright issue remained unresolved.

It is possible that in the future Prokofiev might have acknowledged the true source of the opera's origin, but in 1952, when the American critic Olin Downes asked the Soviet composer—then living in the USSR and subjected to persecution<sup>36</sup>—what had inspired him to choose such an unusual operatic subject,

<sup>32</sup> see Introduction – in *Three Loves for Three Oranges. Gozzi, Meyerhold, Prokofiev*. Edited by Dassia N. Posner and Kevin Bartig with Maria De Simone. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 27.

<sup>33</sup> "Liubov' k trem apel'sinam," *Zhurnal doktora Dapertutto* ("Love for Three Oranges," *Doctor Dapertutto's Journal*). no. 1, (1914): 18–47.

<sup>34</sup> Frolova-Walker, 182.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Galanina, "From divertissement to opera. Two Russian oranges," in *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, 253–269, 256

<sup>36</sup> In February 1948, the Central Committee of VKP(b) issued a resolution titled "On the Opera 'The Great Friendship' by V. Muradeli," in which Soviet composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Myaskovsky, Popov, Shebalin, and Khachaturian were subjected to harsh criticism for "formalism." A number of Prokofiev's works were banned from performance.

Prokofiev merely referred to a certain “contemporary theatrical journal that published Gozzi’s play,” clearly fearing to mention the name of Meyerhold, who had been executed and excluded from Soviet artistic life.<sup>37</sup> When the director was later rehabilitated, the composer was no longer alive, and thus the story of *The Three Oranges* remained shrouded in secrecy until the 2020s.

It is unknown whether Komissarzhevsky was aware of this background. Most likely, he read Meyerhold’s journal and certainly saw his productions before the revolution. But fate played a cruel joke on him as well. Judging by the correspondence with Victor Seroff published below, the director once again decided to revise Prokofiev’s libretto—the co-authors actively exchanged texts, but then Seroff appropriated sole authorship, excluding Komissarzhevsky and even attempting to explain to him that the director had hardly participated in the work on the text. The translation was described by the contemporary American musicologist Kevin Bartig as “puzzlingly loose.”<sup>38</sup> Seroff, later referring in his biography of Prokofiev to the translation he himself had made, sought to legitimize it by calling it a paraphrase rather than a translation, and that the numerous cuts were allegedly motivated by his desire to bring the text closer to Gozzi’s original. Thus, not only Meyerhold but also Komissarzhevsky disappeared from the text.

### Komissarzhevsky and opera

Starting from 1915, Komissarzhevsky turned to the opera genre—his first production at Zimin’s Theater was Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, which received mixed reviews in the press.<sup>39</sup> He also dreamed of staging a comic opera—in one of his letters to Zimin, he mentioned *The Tales of Hoffmann*.<sup>40</sup> After that, one opera followed one another.

After moving abroad, in the 1920s and 1930s, he staged quite a few operatic performances in Europe, but he dreamed of America, as he mentioned in a letter to the artist Sudeikin, who had settled there and could potentially help the director through his connections in theatrical circles. In 1925, Fyodor Fyodorovich still harbored illusions about America, not having received enough recognition in England (which came later, in the 1930s).

“This work (there is nothing to do here in opera)<sup>41</sup> interests me a lot. Maybe it is something to live on for a while in the beginning. And then I’ll figure it out. If only there was a non-compromising job at the start... In Europe, I have worked in England, Paris, and Vienna—drama, opera, and ballet. In

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At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers in 1948, Boris Asafyev and Tikhon Khrennikov spoke out against Prokofiev.

<sup>37</sup> Kevin Bartig, “Oranges in Leningrad by Sergei Prokofiev,” in *Three Loves*, 409.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin Bartig, “Oranges in Leningrad,” in *Three Loves*, 408.

<sup>39</sup> V. Borovskii, *Moskovskaia opera S. I. Zimina (Moscow Opera of S. I. Zimin)* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1977), 156–160.

<sup>40</sup> Komissarzhevskii, *Ya i Teatr*, 261.

<sup>41</sup> By “here” he means Europe.

London, opera at Covent Garden; in Paris, opera at Champs Elysées, etc.”<sup>42</sup>

He characterized the theatrical situation in European cities as deplorable:

“Europe—that is, the countries where I have worked until now—is a wonderful place, but the culture here is decaying, especially theater. And I want to leave it all.”<sup>43</sup>

Since in the 1920s the director still held illusions about the USSR as well, corresponding with officials about his return, he wrote in the same letter:

“Perhaps there are only two countries with hope—Russia and America. Going to the first for reasons of gluttony (terrible that one must think about this!) is frightening. The second is very expensive—you need capital, and there’s none.”<sup>44</sup>

He explained his request by the fact that he had already tried to get a contract at the Metropolitan Opera but had no success:

“By the way, officially, nothing can be done with the Met Opera this season. I have already ‘negotiated’ with O. Kan and Gatti-Casazza. So officially, don’t bother them, dear. It’s useless.”<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, he did move to America in the 1930s and got the opportunity to stage operas, albeit not at the Metropolitan, but in a promising new project, the New York City Opera. From 1946 to 1952, his name appears in all the theater’s printed materials.<sup>46</sup>

*Life* magazine wrote about his production of *The Love for Three Oranges* in October 1950, but the review was quite short and mostly dedicated to Prokofiev and his tragic fate in the Soviet Union. However, it was accompanied by beautiful color photos showing fragments of the performance with commentary.<sup>47</sup>

### Collaboration with Victor Seroff – a view through Harvard letters

A large part of Victor Seroff’s letters, preserved in the Harvard archive, is devoted to the discussion of the opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, although another project is mentioned, possibly Pushkin’s tales, as well as a play—presumably based on Dostoevsky’s story *Uncle’s Dream*—which

<sup>42</sup> Komissarzhevskii, *Ya i Teatr*, 267.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>44</sup> Komissarzhevskii, *Ya i Teatr*, 267.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Sokol, 236-271.

<sup>47</sup> “The Love for Three Oranges: A Slaphappy Fairy Tale Makes a Smash-Hit Opera,” *Life*, 29, no. 14 (October 2, 1950): 79-81. [https://books.google.ca/books?id=9ksEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=9ksEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Komissarzhevsky never staged because he suffered several more heart attacks and died in 1954. Moreover, he probably did not want to collaborate with Seroff anymore. Borovsky's biography does not mention none of these projects, although the author repeatedly emphasizes that Komissarzhevsky dreamed of staging not only Chekhov in America but also Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and possibly Pushkin.

According to Seroff's letters, the work on the text (or rather joint work with Komissarzhevsky) was almost completed by August 1949, with only the final touches and approvals remaining.

Archive staff forming the folder with letters suggest that Seroff's very first letter to Komissarzhevsky was sent on August 4, 1949, the second on November 22 of the same year, followed by several undated letters, though logically the order seems disturbed. One undated letter placed after the first two was clearly written much earlier—perhaps one or two years before. The simplest confirmation is the author's location: if on August 4, 1949, Seroff wrote from his home in New York, then in the undated letter he states he is in Europe and cannot return before September—most likely summer 1948 or even 1947. In that letter, Seroff gives his address in France and asks Komissarzhevsky how he is doing in New York, where in 1949 Fyodor Fyodorovich was absent because he was in England and returned home to Connecticut only on September 1.<sup>48</sup> From 1946, he indeed worked in New York—starting from September, he regularly staged operas at the New York City Opera.<sup>49</sup>

From another undated letter by Seroff, written in an unknown summer (in July), it becomes known that he was traveling in California (San Francisco and Hollywood), where he not only worked in a library but also met conductor Leopold Stokowski,<sup>50</sup> who was there in the summer of 1948, resting at his home after a US tour. In 1947 and 1949, the conductor toured Europe all summer.<sup>51</sup>

Most likely, negotiations on joint projects between Komissarzhevsky and Seroff began in the summer of 1947, continued in 1948, and by the summer of 1949, work on the libretto of Prokofiev's opera was underway. But this is only a hypothesis to be confirmed.

According to the letter of August 4, 1949, Seroff was urgently finishing the translation of Prokofiev's opera libretto under contract with City Center and the

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<sup>48</sup> Borovsky, 452.

<sup>49</sup> See *Annals in Sokol, 1944-1981*: 236, 239, 241, 244, 247, 250, 253, 271. Komissarzhevsky is mentioned as one of the directors of the New York City Opera from 1946 through 1952 (spring 1952 being the last mention). Borovsky, in Komissarzhevsky's biography, does not mention his 1952 production (the opera *Wozzeck*).

<sup>50</sup> Leopold Stokowski (1882–1977) was a British and American conductor. In 1945–1946, he headed the Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra. In the late 1940s, he worked as a guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic, and in 1949–1950 he co-led it together with Dimitris Mitropoulos. He frequently performed works by Russian and Soviet composers, many of them for the first time in the United States. In 1958, he toured the Soviet Union. In 1949, he conducted the premiere performance of Prokofiev's *Sixth Symphony*.

<sup>51</sup> Oliver Daniel, *Stokowski: A Counterpoint of View* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1982), 520, 522

publisher Boosey & Hawkes.<sup>52</sup> Since he complains about having done the work in a very short time, one can conclude that he spent the summer of 1949 in New York (and the letter was sent from there).

There are also signs suggesting that correspondence began earlier, although archivists indicate only the period 1949–1950 on the folder cover. In particular, in one undated letter, Victor Ilyich does not yet mention the opera libretto, which in 1949 was being thoroughly discussed by the co-authors, but only asks Komissarzhevsky about possible cooperation such as writing a play. By indirect hints, it can be guessed that this is either a play based on Pushkin's tales or on Dostoevsky's story (though the authors planned to deal with Dostoevsky after Prokofiev's opera as well). However, the material is clearly insufficient, and the letters are rather fragmentary.

The author dares to suggest that the undated letter, located in the archive after the first two letters (August and November 1949), was written two years earlier, in 1947, and sent from a village in the French mountains, Villers-sur-Tour. In it, Victor Ilyich mentions his adventures related to arranging his personal life—"kidnapping" a woman from Czechoslovakia and taking her to France, where they are waiting for American documents for her.<sup>53</sup> The letter contains little concrete information about joint projects, but importantly, from it, we can infer the relationship between the future co-authors: Seroff shares some quite adventurous details of his life with Komissarzhevsky, demonstrating their friendship and even asking the director for a few favors. Judging by the beginning of the letter, Komissarzhevsky had read some of Seroff's texts and expressed remarks, which Victor Ilyich intended to take into account.

Seroff also mentions an upcoming trip to Nice, associated with many memories of his stay there with Isadora Duncan, not the most pleasant ones. It was in Nice that he provoked the dancer's jealousy with long seclusion with a female acquaintance of his, after which Isadora nearly committed suicide.<sup>54</sup> He left Nice on the eve of her death, and she felt betrayed and abandoned.<sup>55</sup> But, of course, Seroff omits this chapter of his biography, referring only to a forthcoming meeting with musicologist, Russian émigré Leonid Sabaneev, living in France.

An interesting detail—Victor Ilyich asks Komissarzhevsky how to send a package to the USSR—apparently, he wanted to send someone his book about Shostakovich. A copy with Seroff's autograph is kept at the Rudomino Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow. It was gifted to the Soviet diplomat Vladimir Ivanovich Bazykin,<sup>56</sup> mentioned by the author among others in the

<sup>52</sup> Publishing house specialized on sheet music.

<sup>53</sup> According to Jeanne Bresciani, Seroff had four wives. In Shostakovich's biography, written earlier and published in 1943, Seroff mentions a wife named Katherine.

<sup>54</sup> P. Kurth, *Isadora. A Sensational Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 531–532.

<sup>55</sup> Sewell Stokes, *Isadora Duncan: An Intimate Portrait* (London: Brentano's, 2013 [1928]), 45, 108.

<sup>56</sup> Vladimir Ivanovich Bazykin was a Soviet diplomat. From 1940 to 1945, he served as Second Secretary of the Plenipotentiary Mission—the Embassy of the USSR in the United States.

“Acknowledgments” section. The composer’s aunt, Nadezhda Galli-Shohat,<sup>57</sup> was a co-author in writing the book—her autograph is also present in the dedication. However, it is quite possible that Victor Ilyich presented the book to Bazykin in the USA, where he worked at the Plenipotentiary Mission-Embassy in the 1940s, and intended to send other copies to the USSR.

The composer and musicologist Leonid Sabaneev, who emigrated from the USSR in 1926 and settled in France (since 1933 had lived in Nice), published several books about composers in the 1920s in Russian, and two of them later became subjects of Seroff’s English-language biographies—Ravel and Debussy. As Seroff admits in his book on Shostakovich, he drew much of his material from communicating with experts, so Sabaneev might have given him ideas for further work. Moreover, the English translation of Sabaneev’s essays on Russian composers showed Seroff that there was interest in this topic in the USA but very little information, since the essays in the book contained only basic facts and some comments.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the letter placed in folder under the number three, I publish first.

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!

I received your letter and took note of it, as they say. So, we will write the play when I return to New York<sup>59</sup>, but when will I return? I’m afraid it will not be before September. The thing is, although I have not yet been arrested here in Prague [as of today]... I must confess to you... I got married to Elena (?)<sup>60</sup> and... imagine that I somehow managed to get her out of Prague. How and by what means is another matter, and I will tell you about it when I see you – but I did get her out, and according to all the rules of the law, <illegible> to say – but without going into details. Of course, I won’t go back to Prague anymore, but while I am waiting for an American visa for my wife, I will be in France. Tomorrow I’m going to Nice for a few days. I want to see L. Sabaneev. Then I will return here. What are you doing this summer? From your handwriting, it’s clear you can’t stand writing letters, but still, scribble me a few words about how things are going for you in New York, and, by the way, send me the address of a company or store that sends niche (?) packages to Soviet Russia. I promised to send a couple of

<sup>57</sup> Nadezhda Galli-Shokhat, Shostakovich’s aunt, was a physicist. She began teaching in Siberia at the Ural Federal University. In 1923, she moved to the United States with her second husband and taught at a number of American universities – see *Abilene Reporter-News*. Abilene, Texas. Sun, Jul 23, 1944. p. 46, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/abilene-reporter-news-shostakovichs-aun/57814622/>

<sup>58</sup> L. Sabaneev, *Modern Russian Composers*, transl. by Judah A. Joffe. (New York, London: International Publishers, 1927). Sabaneev begins the book by stating that Russia’s musical life is terra incognita for the contemporary Western readers – p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> It is not clear which play he refers to.

<sup>60</sup> The name is written illegibly, and there is no information about this woman, just as there is none about Seroff’s other wives.

packages, but I don't have the address of the store. Please be so kind as to write to me here. And if there is only your company's (?), then get the forms that need to be filled out and send them to me (only Air Mail), otherwise it will be Ro/medicine (?) by the time I get it. Always write to me at this address:

c/o Jean Roman  
 Willer sur Thur  
 Haut Rhin, France  
 Greetings to your family  
 Yours, Seroff

The next two letters are related to Seroff's trip to California. Most likely, they were written in the summer of 1948. He is still working on his book about the composers from Mighty Five group, published in 1948, plans to work in the university library in San Francisco, and also will have several meetings in Hollywood. Conductor Leopold Stokowski is mentioned, who was in the USA during the summer of 1948, including San Francisco and Beverly Hills. Since Stokowski was no longer in California in the summer of 1949 (he was touring Europe conducting various orchestras)<sup>61</sup>, Seroff's letters were most likely written in 1948.

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!

By the time you receive my message, I will already be at the final stretch (the third (?) ) of my exile.

On July 16, I am going to San Francisco, where I will stay until Saturday (the 21st). I want to dig into the library at the University – they say the whole library once belonged to Milyukov.<sup>62</sup> Then, from the 22nd, I will be in Hollywood. I would like to have your version of the Pushkin fairy tales with me so I can immediately discuss everything with Stokowski.<sup>63</sup> I wrote to you that he was interested in this idea and now he is waiting for me to continue. So, what about you, have you reconsidered or are you lazy?

From Drew Grild (?) I have received \$50 so far.

I hope everything is fine.

Remember you once told me about Kruglikov – I found his article on Mussorgsky.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Daniel, 522.

<sup>62</sup> He may refer to the Hoover Institution at Stanford, although Milyukov's archive is housed at Columbia University in New York.

<sup>63</sup> Komissarzhevsky thought of staging Alexander Pushkin's writings, along with other Russian classic's literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Turgenev, Tolstoy, Ostrovsky), in the mid-1940s—see Borovsky, 446. In two biographies of Stokowski, there is not a single mention of any project related to Pushkin's fairy tales.

<sup>64</sup> It is likely referring to the article by Sem. Kruglikov, "Mussorgsky and His *Boris Godunov*," *Artist* no. 5, (1890).

Here, I once met some Park A[...] <illegible>, who, without knowing who I am or what I am, said she was raising money last winter for a Russian opera for Mrs. Irion.<sup>65</sup> She says she scraped together \$1200.

Does Irion call you, saying you hung Igor<sup>66</sup> on a nail?

Strangely enough, here I met the composer who wrote “Deep in the Heart of Texas”<sup>67</sup> and he offered me to write a musical play with music <illegible> Retro.

There are more plots here than you can shake a stick at,<sup>68</sup> but I am still busy with my “Mighty Five.”<sup>69</sup> Maybe on the way to Hollywood I will come up with something. All the best for now. Greet your wife and Tanya.<sup>70</sup>

Don’t be lazy. Write to me a few words now, because it’s not <illegible> here. And send Air Mail, otherwise letters take ages.

Yours, Seroff

From the next letter, it is clear that Seroff again discusses some projects with conductor Leopold Stokowski. Seroff was not only well acquainted with the conductor, but in 1945 even planned to write his biography, as evidenced by their correspondence published in Stokowski’s biography by Oliver Daniels. However, at that time the conductor declined the proposal, joking that the most interesting part of his life could not be described, and what could be included in the biography was not interesting at all.<sup>71</sup> However, it seems Komissarzhevsky had already cooled down on the joint project he himself initiated and did not respond. The following letter begins with reproaches about the director’s silence.

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!

Why are you stuck on <illegible> with some eternal

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<sup>65</sup> It is most likely referring to Yolanda Mero-Irion, an American pianist of Hungarian origin who became a theatrical producer in the 1940s—see Sokol, 33. She led The New Opera Company from 1941. The company dissolved due to a lack of funding. As a pianist, Mero-Irion performed with renowned conductors, including Stokowski. Among Russian operas, the company staged Tchaikovsky’s *The Queen of Spades* and Mussorgsky’s *The Fair at Sorochyntsi*. The company collaborated with Russian émigré choreographers, including George Balanchine and Leonid Massine. It is possible that Seroff refers to events in New York that occurred before his trip to California.

<sup>66</sup> It may refer to Borodin’s opera *Prince Igor*. However, there is no evidence that Komissarzhevsky planned to stage it in the United States. He did stage it in Russia in 1915 – see Komissarzhevsky. *Ya i teatr*, 277, and probably in England in 1919.

<sup>67</sup> The song “Deep in the Heart of Texas” was written by June Hershey and Don Swander in 1941 and soon became incredibly popular, performed by well-known singers.

<sup>68</sup> In Russian, the phrase sounds quite rude – There are so many plots that you could feed pigs with them.

<sup>69</sup> Seroff published the book on the composers from the group “The Mighty Five” in 1948. In 1949 it was published in French, in 1968 – in German.

<sup>70</sup> Tanya Metaksa (born in 1936) – daughter of Komissarzhevsky and Stodel.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel, xxiv.

fermata? No word or sound from you, and Stokowski keeps asking me if I received a letter from you. Here you are – you started something and then disappeared from the face of the earth. He is quite interested in the idea and if I had something more concrete to show him, maybe something real could come out of it. He has a clever guy here who manages his affairs. But you keep silent. Well, what do you expect!

So, will you write what and how, or not?

Greetings to your family

Yours, V. Seroff

My address is on the back.

V. Seroff c/o Mrs. John Crown

1333 North Orange Grove

Hollywood, Cal

The next letter from Seroff was probably written from New York in the summer of 1949, which is evident because a specific project is discussed—the libretto of the opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, although this title does not appear. The letter shows emerging disagreements between co-authors, which have not yet escalated into an open conflict. Seroff’s tone becomes tense – he is unhappy that the director does not understand the difference between a libretto and a play for dramatic theater, does not consider the convenience of the text for singers, and is also poorly acquainted with the peculiarities of American English (this is understandable because the director spent many years in England). Furthermore, the discussion already touches on the honorarium – Komissarzhevsky clearly reproached Seroff for receiving more, while Victor Ilyich argues the opposite. Also, according to contemporaries, Komissarzhevsky’s character was quite difficult<sup>72</sup> – as seen from the letter, he constantly changed his decisions and proposed unrealistic ideas. Some phrases in Seroff’s letter sound rather threatening – “What’s wrong with you all of a sudden?”<sup>73</sup> ““Back and forth all the time,”<sup>74</sup> “a hodgepodge of words”, “I will veto it”, “nothing will come of it”, etc. One thing is clear – there was Komissarzhevsky’s manuscript that Seroff was rewriting or a draft of the translation first made by Seroff and later revised by his co-author. In short, the libretto work was done by both co-authors, and both received honorarium.

### Undated letter – possibly summer 1949, New York

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich!

I have just received your letter and must confess that its tone both surprised and offended me. What, tell me, bit you, as they say in Czech? And what’s with this dictatorial “do it or else”<sup>75</sup>? And what benefits are you hinting at? Come on, I have

<sup>72</sup> Borovsky, 435.

<sup>73</sup> In Russian it sounds as “What wasp bit you?”

<sup>74</sup> He says in Russian – “Two Fridays in one week” although the Russian saying is “Seven Fridays a week.”

<sup>75</sup> This is written in English

as much benefit from your production as you do, if not less. This also applies to the corrections and to the fact that when I wrote to you, I hadn't even seen the manuscript yet. I received it on Monday and reviewed it yesterday. I agree with most of them and can easily make changes, but there are <illegible> phrases and words that don't fit.

You seem to have forgotten, sir, that this is not a play—there is rhythm and accent here, and you're just clowning around; there are words that are hard to sing, and some that are unknown in America and won't be found in any dictionary. Even, my good sir, here are some!

I did the translation guided by your letters, and you have two Fridays in one week. First this way, then that way, then back to the old way. All of this should have been decided earlier before dictating to me. At first, you wanted your characters to speak pompously, and now you have some kind of hodgepodge. Sophisticated words mixed with 3rd Avenue.

You're also slacking off somewhere in "Boosey and Hawkes," and here I am expected to sit and work hard, and quickly too.

The City Center is calling us to the fire. And you're writing to some Broadway producers! What producers? We are the authors, and we have the rights. If you start messing up the language, I will veto it. So that's it, sir, and no hints about benefits will help you. Let's better be friendly about this. I am an easygoing person, but if you dictate, nothing will come of it. Send me the rest. But please write legibly. At the beginning of Act 3, I missed two phrases because I didn't know who was blowing into whose back. And don't forget that the "book"—the libretto—should read on its own with meaning, not like Stravinsky's music, in which without a picture or ballet nothing is clear.

Halasz wants to write everything into the score himself. Well, let him write it.

Change your favorite Kitchensneep (?)

This word is not known in America.

When you have to explain words – it's not good. It's hot here. I can't write more. All the best.

Yours, Seroff

And finally, the dated letters sent shortly before and after the premiere of Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges* in New York – on August 4 and November 22.

In August 1949, Komissarzhevsky was still in England, where he had long wanted to be but, to his great disappointment, had received no contracts.

Seroff's letter was sent there, although the address is very hard to read. Between these two letters, many important events occurred: Komissarzhevsky's heart attack immediately after returning to the USA, his replacement by another director at the New York City Opera – Vladimir Rozing, the premiere, and finally the publication of the libretto without crediting his authorship. In the letter dated August 4, Seroff reports that he gave the libretto text to Halasz and no longer wants or can make any more changes, being busy with other matters and not considering the honorarium sufficient for revisions – it seems that Komissarzhevsky, as always, was unhappy and asked for something to be changed.

[Envelope]  
 V. Seroff  
 122 E. 92  
 NYC – 78

#### August 4, 1949

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich,

Yesterday I delivered the entire opera to Halasz. They will reprint the text and send it to you.

I received your letter with corrections for the Prologue. I revised it except for two or three phrases that cannot be sung because of their acousts. As for the rest—the entire play—if you want to change everything again, I'm striking. I cannot redo the opera twice for \$400 in such a short time.

That's why I suggested waiting for your return so we can discuss together what needs to be fixed. Don't be angry with me, but I simply cannot do it. To finish the opera, I sometimes worked until 3 or 4 a.m. and had to postpone two articles for *Town and Country* which I now must write. So physically, I cannot rewrite the opera.

As for the choruses—Halasz told me he knows everything himself. I tried to explain to him that all this is very complicated, but he didn't want to listen—says he knew everything himself. Now I don't even have a piano score.

Everything is with Halasz.

In two or three places, I didn't write the words (two or three phrases) because I didn't know what you wanted.

Halasz told me he wants to finish the opera with a march. I think that's good!

That's all for now. We have unbearable heat here. I haven't been to Darien,<sup>76</sup> but I spoke on the phone with Mrs. Komissarzhevsky.

<sup>76</sup> Darien is a town in Connecticut where Komissarzhevsky's family lived.

She didn't have time to finish the play. So, we'll have to wait for your arrival.

There is <illegible>

Yours, Seroff

T. Komissarzhevsky

Stad... Hotel

St. da..e place h... SW 1<sup>77</sup>

### November 22, 1949

V. Seroff

122 E. 92

NYC – 78

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich,

I've been thinking of writing to you for a long time but was terribly busy. I hope you have recovered and now we can meet and resolve the misunderstanding that happened this summer. I don't want to believe that we will be "at odds" over this trivial matter.

I haven't seen *The Oranges*, but my wife was delighted. Either call or drop me a postcard telling me when and where we can meet.

Respectfully yours,

<illegible>

Seroff

The next letter is written in a fairly friendly tone and again discusses a joint project—a play, but there's no information which one. That will become clear from later correspondence.

### April 19, 1950 (registered mail)

Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich,

I called your studio. When I got through, someone said you don't come to the theater. Then I called your home and spoke with Tanya. I don't know if she passed on the message or forgot. I wanted to talk to you about our play. If you don't want to write it, please send me my draft — I'll try to make it myself from the draft.

My wife was ill all winter. I was too. But now we've recovered. How is your health? Regards to you from us.

Yours, Seroff

Three days later, on April 22, Fyodor Fyodorovich answered Seroff, apparently sharply recalling Seroff's inappropriate attitude toward his work and

<sup>77</sup> The address is written very illegibly, but it seems that Komissarzhevsky was still in England.

the absence of Komissarzhevsky's name in the libretto of Prokofiev's opera, as indicated by the phrase about "nonsense regarding your participation in my authorship of the translation of *Love for Three Oranges*," and this seems to be the first time Komissarzhevsky openly asserts this, referring to the theater's error in the contract. Seroff, being quite temperamental, responded even more sharply, switching not only to English and typing his letter but also changing the tone from friendly to formal, addressing his co-author as "Dear Mr. Komissarzhevsky" instead of "Dear Fyodor Fyodorovich." It finally becomes clear that the discussed play was Dostoevsky's *Uncle's Dream*. The sensitive issue of the authorship of the libretto of Prokofiev's opera is raised again.

Dear Mr. Komissarzhevsky -

I am writing you this letter in English so that we both can have the facts on record to avoid any misunderstanding in the future.

From your letter of April 22, I understand that you are going to write by yourself a play based on Dostoevsky's story "Uncle's Dream". As you remember we originally worked together on this idea as a cooperative enterprise, to which you yourself referred in your letters as "our play". Since we both have equal rights in it I consider myself free to write my own version.

However, in order to avoid any confusion I suggest that we should make now some kind of arrangement in case one of our plays should be produced. If this is not agreeable to you, I will take it that you assert no claim on anything I do. However, I reserve my rights in the matter, should your play be produced.

To the best of my knowledge I returned all your material to you when I gave you the first draft of my translation of Dostoevsky's story. However, should I find any additional material among my papers, you can rest assured that I will at once send it back to you.

And now what is all this nonsense about your having any part in my authorship of the translation of "The Love for Three Oranges"? You must admit that this is the first time that you have ever mentioned it to me. In all our correspondence and in all of our conversations you never before made any claim for a share of my author's rights. I did the translation of "The Love for Three Oranges" under contract with both the City Center and Boosey and Hawkes, the publishers of the score of the opera. You will undoubtedly recall that you wrote me several letters in which you stated that all the author's rights belong to me, that your rights are solely of a stage-director, and finally, in your own words you told the reasons why I was invited by the City Center to be the author of the said translation.

As far as I know you were the stage-director for the planned performances of the opera, working under contract with the City Center. If the City Center has “cheated” you, as you say in your letter, I do not see how I can help you.

Sincerely,  
Victor Seroff

Kommissarzhevsky’s response is also typed in English on his personal letterhead. The director emphasizes that he does not intend to take legal action, but the word “nonsense” clearly offended him, since he not only initiated *The Love for Three Oranges* (and possibly even recommended Seroff as his co-author, with whom he had previously begun collaborating on another project), but also worked extensively on the libretto. The tone of the letter is extremely sharp, and it is obvious that Fyodor Fyodorovich is putting an end to their relationship, despite his stated willingness to “consider” the possibility of further cooperation after receiving an official request from Seroff.

**Handwritten: Registered. Return receipt <illegible>**

May 1st, 1950

Dear Seroff,

You wrote me in English to place the matter on a “legal” basis. I am answering in English too, but just out of courtesy. I don’t propose starting any kind of litigation with you.

As to the “Love ‘tor Three Orange “, if you consider the book of the City Center version as of your own intention and of your own translation, well... I prefer then not to talk about “all this nonsense”, as you are calling it.

Dostoyevsky’s works are free for anyone to translate, adapt or dramatize, and there are very many dramatic adaptations all over the world of almost each of his major works (including “The Uncle’s Dream”). So you and I have each the right to dramatize “Uncle’s Dream” or base a play upon the canvas of the novel. If you wish to make some kind of arrangement about the proposed plays, please send me a letter to this effect: I am prepared to consider it.

I will be obliged if you would return my draft of the first act of my own version of the play to me.

As to your remarks about my relationship to the City Center and their “cheating me”, you are misinformed about my contract, etc., and I’ve never used the word “cheating” in my letters (Russian) to you.

Yours sincerely,  
[no signature]

Komissarzhevsky was able to realize several more projects—he staged Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline* in Canada for the Montreal Festival of Music and Drama in July 1950 and began working on a book about the art of directing,<sup>78</sup> as he mentioned in a letter to the writer and innovative theater director Nikolai Evreinov,<sup>79</sup> who was also an active participant in pre-revolutionary theatrical life and now lived in Paris. Fyodor Fyodorovich wrote also the play *The Sweet Content*, dreaming of its production in England, but received a reply from his ex-wife, actress Peggy Ashcroft, stating that it was impossible to stage it.<sup>80</sup> In 1952, he realized his last opera production at the New York City Opera—Berg’s *Wozzeck*.<sup>81</sup>

A crack in his family life due to a new infatuation with his young female student, growing irritation with America, attempts to move back to England, and another heart attack—all this distracted Komissarzhevsky both from the “disputes” over the authorship of the opera libretto and from his work on *Uncle’s Dream*—this play is not mentioned either in Borovsky’s biography or anywhere else. Four years after the last letter, in 1954, Komissarzhevsky died.

Victor Seroff continued his successful career at the intersection of musicology and biographical genre, outliving his outstanding collaborator by more than two decades—he died in 1979 at the age of 77. Despite being considered an honest and noble man, as told to the author by the Duncan dancer and scholar Jeanne Bresciani, this correspondence rather suggests the opposite—Seroff’s actions do not seem honorable, although he may have had his reasons and justifications. Fyodor Fyodorovich, on the other hand, behaved quite nobly, not engaging in petty quarrels and not trying to defend his rights—the scale of his personality compelled him to move forward, to large new projects, of which he realized more than enough in his life to remain in the history of theater.

Interestingly, it became possible to revive innovations from Russian theater of the 1910s in the United States in 1949 (including ironic pantomime, elements of commedia dell’arte and performance art, the embodiment of the idea of total theater involving audience members). In the USSR, none of these innovations took root, as socialist realism was dominant and further experimentation was not possible.

And “*The Love for Three Oranges*” at the New York City Opera, undeservedly forgotten for more than half a century, has finally returned to scholarly attention, although some mysteries behind its production remain to be solved.

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<sup>78</sup> Borovsky, 455.

<sup>79</sup> Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953)—a Russian director, dramatist and theatre practitioner, theorist of theater and philosopher.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> Sokol, 272.

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## **Hosting in the Heart of Moscow: Selling Consumer Culture to Russian Women through the American National Exhibition, 1959**

**Author:** Diana Cucuz

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### **Abstract**

During the early Cold War, America's normative gender roles and consumption-oriented culture became intertwined with its foreign policy goals in rivalling its primary "threat," the Soviet Union. This paper will discuss the American National Exhibition, a grand spectacle that took place across six weeks in Moscow during the summer of 1959, and was attended by 2.7 million people. Filled with glittering displays of American consumer culture, the exhibition was rife with representations of happy, fulfilled, and feminine women. This event symbolized the pinnacle of US government efforts to undertake a unique form of female oriented cultural diplomacy and soft power as a means to convince the "other" – Russian women - that the American way of life could improve their own lives, due to its consumer goods and their accompanying comforts and conveniences. It is part of a larger study on the American National Exhibition which seeks to demonstrate that cultural diplomacy and soft power should be considered an important element in the gradual erosion of the Soviet government.

# Hosting in the Heart of Moscow: Selling Consumer Culture to Russian Women through the American National Exhibition, 1959

**Diana Cucuz**

**Toronto Metropolitan University**

No propaganda operation of the US government since the war will be under as intense a spotlight of press, public and Congressional attention as will this Exhibit. It will be watched carefully and critically by a whole country eager at long last to present a clear, uncensored, and unjammed image of America to the Soviet peoples.<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 1959, Moscow's Sokolniki Park was transformed into a glittering spectacle of American consumption and culture. For six weeks - from 24 July to 4 September 1959 - the US government hosted an American National Exhibition (ANEM), the first foreign event of its kind since the Russian Revolution. With more than 2.7 million visitors flooding the park gates, the ANEM became a watershed event in US-Soviet cultural relations.<sup>2</sup> It is most often remembered for its opening day "Kitchen Debate" between US Vice-President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, two impromptu exchanges during which they debated the relative merits of capitalism and communism, culminating in an agreement to acknowledge their differences and have a toast "to the ladies."<sup>3</sup> However the exhibition was much more than this debate. The ANEM provided a rare opportunity for the US government to directly interact with Russians, particularly women, in the hopes of providing them with an understanding of American women, their way of life, and the benefits a capitalist consumer culture

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<sup>1</sup> Policy Guidance for the US Exhibit in Moscow in 1959; Box 7; Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; General Records of the US Information Agency, Record Group 306 (RG 306); National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP).

<sup>2</sup> Harold C. McClellan, "The American National Exhibition in Moscow, 24 July – 4 September 1959," December 1959; Box 51; Special Report on Spain and French Morocco, 1954 to The Media and Foreign Policy in the Post Cold War, 1993, Records Relating on Select United States Information Agency (USIA) Programs, 1953-1999; General Records of the US Information Agency, Record Group 306 (RG 306); NACP.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 18.

could afford them.<sup>4</sup> It helped to create what became known as a “living standards war” that further intensified the rivalry between the two nations, with women positioned at its core.

During the early Cold War, the US government had limited access to Russians, with the exception of two methods. The first was radio programming, through the Voice of America (VOA). The VOA was established in 1942 and began broadcasting to Russians in 1947. However, its ability to reach them was precarious, as it was frequently jammed by the Soviet government beginning in 1949.<sup>5</sup> The second was print material, through *Amerika* magazine. *Amerika* was published from 1945 until 1952, and then again beginning in 1956. Similar to *Life*, it was a glossy Russian language magazine filled with stories and pictures on American life and culture. In contrast to the VOA, it had the added benefit of including visual representations, often in color, to foster an appealing image of the US.<sup>6</sup> So when the ANEM was held in 1959, it represented a unique period in US-Soviet relations, as it became the first time Russian women could directly witness, touch and use the vast amounts of consumer goods and services they had heard of while listening to the VOA and saw in *Amerika*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was composed of fifteen diverse republics this study will focus on US activities targeting those citizens residing in the heart of the Soviet Union, the ones who felt the ramifications of the “Soviet Experiment” from its beginning: the Russian people. It will refer to them as Russians rather than Soviets, as the latter can apply to the citizens residing in any of the fourteen other republics. The Soviet government will still be referred to as such.

<sup>5</sup> The VOA was created in 1942 to inform foreigners of US war aims. It began broadcasting to Russians in 1947 to discredit the Soviet government and counter Soviet propaganda. For more on the VOA during its early Cold War years, see David F. Krugler, *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945-1953*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); and A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, ed., *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (New York: Central European University Press, 2010); It should be noted that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) also ran Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) as a method to communicate with citizens of the Soviet Union and its satellite states. RFE was created in 1949 to broadcast to Soviet satellite states, and RL in 1951 to broadcast to the Soviet Union itself. They merged in 1976. For more on RFE/RE, see A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2010); Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, KY, 2000); Gene Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty: An Insider's Memoir of Radio Liberty* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> For more on *Amerika*, see: Diana Cucuz, *Winning Women's Hearts and Minds: Cold War Culture in the US and the USSR* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023); and Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> From 1959 to 1991, the USIA brought twenty-three exhibitions to nine cities in the Soviet Union. For more on these exhibitions, see Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University, 2003); Jenny and Sherry Thompson, “‘Dueling Exhibitions’ in *The Kremlinologist: Llewellyn E. Thompson, America's Man in Cold War Moscow* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 180-189; Tomas Tolvaisas, “Cold War ‘Bridge-Building’: Exchange Exhibits and Their Reception in the Soviet Union, 1959-1967,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* (12.4), 1959-1967, 3-31; and Andrew James Wulf,

The ANEM was integral to America's early Soviet information program. It serves as a case study to explore how the US government drew on traditional gender norms and deployed images of supposedly happy and fulfilled American women as feminine wives, mothers and homemakers living under a capitalistic consumer culture in order to win women's hearts and minds. More broadly, it serves as a microcosm of the significance of women, gender and consumption to international politics during the early Cold War. A large portion of the events and displays at the ANEM, either advertently or inadvertently, involved women. They were used to promote an American style consumer culture which could supposedly better serve the needs and desires of Russian women. This article will demonstrate two things: first, that US government officials believed these images would resonate with Russians, particularly women, and create in them a desire for consumption. They sought to instill in Russian women the belief that they not only *wanted* the consumer goods that American women supposedly had at their disposal, but also that they *needed* them in order to make their lives more comfortable and convenient. Second, that officials believed these newfound wants and needs would contribute to the gradual destabilization of a Soviet regime that not only failed to offer what the US government supposedly provided for its women – namely, “special privileges” characterized by consumer goods – but also a level of gender equality that promised to alleviate “domestic slavery” through socialized housework. Ultimately, through the ANEM, this article will demonstrate the effectiveness that US government officials attributed to cultural diplomacy, or “soft power,” during the early Cold War.

### **A New Approach to Cold War Diplomacy**

During the early Cold War, the Soviet government initiated an “anti-American” campaign that limited the US government's ability to maintain a presence in the Soviet Union and its satellite states. In response, the US government adopted a program of gradual “cultural infiltration.”<sup>8</sup> After President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1953 inauguration, he began to prioritize this approach. While serving as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force during World War II, he became aware of the power of public opinion and had a strong desire to develop connections with ordinary people. This opportunity presented itself just two months after his inauguration when long-time Soviet leader Josef Stalin died and Khrushchev rose to power. Khrushchev's 1956 “Secret Session” speech denouncing Stalin and his cult of personality before the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party (CP) of the Soviet Union led to a new era in its diplomatic relations. Khrushchev's move away from Stalinist policies included “peaceful coexistence” and increased contact with the West. This change, which aligned with Eisenhower's goal of increased contact, stemmed from the changing methods of international relations. Until the beginning of the Cold War the US government, like other peacetime governments, practiced traditional diplomacy,

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*US International Exhibitions during the Cold War: Winning Hearts and Minds* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

the process of forging relationships with other nations, often relying on the interaction of high-ranking officials in order to reach a formal agreement based on a particular foreign policy decision.<sup>9</sup> After World War II, new transportation and communications technologies altered the nature of international relations, allowing governments to connect and interact with people more frequently and exchange knowledge. Eisenhower recognized that in light of the ideological battle of the Cold War, public opinion was important and had the potential to stimulate policy formulation.<sup>10</sup>

In 1953, Eisenhower created the United States Information Agency (USIA), which reflected this new strategy.<sup>11</sup> It became America's first ever peacetime propaganda agency. However, in order to win government support for the USIA and its initiatives, the administration distinguished its "information" program from that of the Soviet Union, which it called "propagandistic" and tied to lies and deception.<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower went to great lengths to separate America's overseas information program from the Soviet Union's activities, stating that the agency would concentrate on objective, factual news and commentaries.<sup>13</sup> Other officials reiterated these claims, indicating that the USIA neither practiced psychological warfare nor utilized propaganda techniques, but did admit it was attempting to win people over. This process became known as "cultural diplomacy," a method carried out by official government agencies to promote American culture abroad. That culture may consist of a "high" culture including literature, theatre, classical music and the fine arts, or a "low" culture including film, television, and popular music.<sup>14</sup> This study will center on the consumer culture that was prevalent in postwar America and throughout the exhibition, as the US competed with the Soviet Union in a "living standards war" alongside the Cold War. Fittingly, the

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<sup>9</sup> Hans N. Tuch, *Communicating with the World: US Public Diplomacy Overseas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>10</sup> International Educational Exchange Program, "The Citizens Role in Cultural Relations," September 1959; Box 2, p. 1; Organization, News Articles, 1955-1974 to Agency Mission, 1947-1969; Subject Files, 1953-2000; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the history of the USIA, see Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Nicholas J. Cull, *The Decline and Fall of the United States Information Agency: American Public Diplomacy, 1989-2001* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); See Wilson P. Dizard, Jr., *Strategy of Truth: The Story of the US Information Service* (Washington D.C: Public Affairs Press, 1961); Wilson P. Dizard, Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the US Information Agency* (Boulder: Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2004); Allen C. Hansen, *USIA: Public Diplomacy in the Computer Age*, second ed., (New York: Praeger, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Theodore C. Streibert, The New US Information Agency Program; Box 2, p.2; Organization, News Articles, 1955-1974 to Agency Mission, 1947-1969; Subject Files, 1953-2000; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>13</sup> Statement by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 28 October 1953; Box 2; Organization, News Articles, 1955-1974 to Agency Mission, 1947-1969; Subject Files, 1953-2000; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>14</sup> Michael L. Krenn, *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy: 1770 to the Present Day* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.

USIA's first director, Theodore Streibert, was a seasoned professional in the media industry.<sup>15</sup> According to him, the agency's purpose was to show foreigners that US policies and objectives aligned with their own aspirations for freedom, progress and peace, as well as to counter falsities directed by the "Soviet propaganda machine."<sup>16</sup> The USIA's Soviet information program was characterized by two primary principles. First, it sought to reach Russian citizens to convey broad information and ideas about American democratic values. During that time, this included traditional ideas surrounding gender roles and the family. Second, it sought to introduce those citizens, particularly women, to the American "way of life" and consumer culture, so they could develop a positive perception of the US. Both were on display at the exhibition.

In January 1958, the US and Soviet Union signed an "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical, and Educational Fields." Commonly known as the Lacy-Zarubin agreement after its chief negotiators, William S.B. Lacy, the President's Special Assistant on East-West Exchanges, and Georgi Z. Zarubin, the Soviet Ambassador to the US, the agreement called for exchanges in the cultural, technical, and educational fields that would contribute to the "betterment of relations between the two countries, thereby also contributing to a lessening of international tensions."<sup>17</sup> Section XIII called for the "Exchange of Exhibits and Publications." Both sides agreed on the "usefulness of exhibits as an effective means of developing mutual understanding between the peoples of the Soviet Union and the United States."<sup>18</sup> In September 1958, the Soviet Embassy and the US State Department signed a "protocol agreement" that called for the exchange of exhibitions demonstrating the scientific, technological and cultural developments of each country. In the summer of 1959, a Soviet exhibition would take place in New York City, and an American exhibition in Moscow.<sup>19</sup>

The opportunity to conduct an exhibition sanctioned by the Soviet government in Russia's capital city cannot be understated – it was immense. The exhibition's objectives highlighted the extent to which fairs had become important tools in creating new markets. Publicly, the exhibition's purpose was to "increase understanding in the Soviet Union of the American people, the land in which they live, and the broad range of American life, including American

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<sup>15</sup> Don North, Oral History Interview with Theodore Streibert, 10 December 1970; DDE Library.

<sup>16</sup> Theodore C. Streibert, *The New US Information Agency Program*; Box 2, p.2 ; *Organization, News Articles, 1955-1974 to Agency Mission, 1947-1969*; Subject Files, 1953-2000; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>17</sup> Joint US – USSR Communiqué on Agreement on Exchanges, January 27 1958; Box 4; *Records Relating to the ANE, Moscow, 1957-1959*; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>18</sup> Agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States, September 10 1958; Box 4; *Records Relating to the ANE, Moscow, 1957-1959*; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum of Agreement between US-USSR. Representatives Pertinent to the Staging of US Exhibit in Moscow; Box 1; *Records Relating to the ANE, Moscow, 1957-1959*; RG 306; NACP.

science, technology and culture.”<sup>20</sup> Privately, the exhibition’s objectives were to counter communist propaganda and undermine the Soviet regime. It sought to do this first, by emphasizing America’s freedom of choice and expression and the constant flow of diverse ideas and consumer goods; second, by emphasizing the “peaceful orientation of the US economy,” showing Soviets that in contrast to their own regime, American science and technology worked for the consumer and should not be perceived as a threat; and finally, seeking to “modify negative stereotypes” of Americans, particularly regarding women, through the displays, and the guides.<sup>21</sup> They worried Europeans believed that American women were fixated on material wealth and lacked a strong work ethic. In effect, that they were superficial and lazy. ANEM organizers intended to sell images of American women that would alleviate or contradict these “misunderstandings.”<sup>22</sup> In doing so, they emphasized what they saw as universal themes that encompassed a woman’s life: fashion and femininity, and the home and homemaking. Thus, the materialism of the former would be offset by the hard work and wholesomeness of the latter.

At 1,500-acres and 400,000 square feet, and located in the Moscow suburbs, Sokolnik Park seemed a fitting venue to host the exhibition (Figure 1).<sup>23</sup> It held two main exhibition buildings. The first was a seventy-eight-foot high, thirty thousand square foot geodesic dome. It was called the “idea” building because it contained information about America. This included a film called *Glimpses of the USA*, on everyday life, an IBM RAMAC computer that answered four thousand questions about the country and a “Gallery of Americans” showing notable, but non-controversial figures such as Abraham Lincoln.<sup>24</sup> The second was a twenty-eight-foot high, fifty thousand square foot fan shaped exhibition hall with a glass front and rear.<sup>25</sup> It was called the “Jungle Gym” because of its steel frame that allowed for two floors and spaces where visitors could see displays from different angles. Each space was allotted a different product, and

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<sup>20</sup> Facts About the American National Exhibition in Moscow 1959; Box 5, p. 1; IBM Reports through VIP Visitors; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-59; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>21</sup> Policy Guidance for the US Exhibit in Moscow in 1959; Box 7 ;Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP. The seventy-five guides, forty-eight male and twenty-seven female, were selected from six hundred candidates, and ranged between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. They were chosen based on their personality, knowledge of Soviet and American affairs, and command of the Russian language. Additional guides were hired by the private sector to work at their displays, but little is written of them in USIA records.

<sup>22</sup> Brussels Fair Theme Committee, Interview with Mrs. Eugenie Anderson, 11 January 1957; Box 9; Abbott Washburn Papers, 1938-2003; DDE Library.

<sup>23</sup> Facts About the American National Exhibition in Moscow 1959; Box 5, p. 2; IBM Reports through VIP Visitors; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-59; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

companies agreed to fund, design, supply and install their exhibits.<sup>26</sup> In addition, there was an outdoor area, where organizers intended to duplicate an “American experience” that resembled a carnival. They gave visitors little direction in terms of where to go and an array of choices. They also provided Russian women with interactive or hands-on experiences. USIA officials aimed for the exhibition to contrast the Soviet Union’s rigidly structured society, where a female shopper rarely had the opportunity to witness, touch and use the products that might peak her interest. Instead, products were located behind counters and women had to wait in line three times to purchase an item: once to select it, once to pay for it and once to obtain it.<sup>27</sup>

### Showcasing Femininity through Fashion Shows and Beauty Products

The exhibition showcased a variety of displays related to science, technology and culture; however, the former were most predominately depicted in such a way that they were intertwined with everyday life to show the comfort, convenience and abundance they brought Americans.<sup>28</sup> Within this structure, the USIA emphasized the universal themes that supposedly encompassed women’s lives, including fashion and femininity. USIA officials hoped that the lure of fashion and beauty products could appeal to Russian women and their supposed desire to appear feminine in a nation that denied them these opportunities. In essence, that with the appropriate products to enhance their dress and appearance, they could appear just as feminine and attractive as their American counterparts.

Throughout the 1950s, fashion played a prominent role in accentuating the supposed differences between American and Russian women. As Djurdja Bartlett has argued, Americans believed that fashion was emblematic of the sophistication of modern American women.<sup>29</sup> At the exhibition, the strongest piece of fashion inspired diplomacy appeared through the half-hour fashion show, which ran four times a day for thirty-five minutes each. For USIA officials, the fashion show would allow Russian women to see firsthand how one could dress fashionably, yet affordably. These fashions were intended to provide a contrast with the images of Russian women that pervaded American mass media, ones that depicted them as being dressed in warm, but frumpy, unfashionable and unfeminine clothing (Figure 2). This is an image that Robert L. Griswold has referred to as “graceless, shapeless, and sexless.”<sup>30</sup> USIA officials drew on these images when establishing

<sup>26</sup> Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: US Exhibitions and their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Zurich, Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers), 188.

<sup>27</sup> Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 211.

<sup>28</sup> The ANEM’s counterpart, the Soviet Exhibition of Science, Technology and Culture, took place from 28 June – 10 August, 1959 in New York City’s Coliseum, a staid concrete building in comparison to what was erected at Sokolniki Park. Its organizers took a decidedly different from the ANEM, focusing heavily on scientific, technological achievements, particularly in outer space.

<sup>29</sup> Djurdja Bartlett, *FashionEast: The Spectre that Haunted Socialism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), 138.

<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Griswold, “‘Russian Blonde in Space’: Russian Women in the American Imagination, 1950-1965,” *Journal of Social History* 45 no. 4 (2012): 882.

the framework and content of the fashion show. Its theme focused on how Americans dressed for their everyday lives, and its purpose was threefold: first, to increase Soviet understanding of the American way of life, highlighting the fashion industry and its contributions; second, to show the cooperation between the public and private sectors and the fashion industry in organizing the show; and finally, to facilitate future cultural and trade exchanges.<sup>31</sup> According to the planning committee, the show predominately emphasized credibility and availability. Fashion show commentators emphasized the benefits of mass production, good fabric and construction and design. They noted that clothing and accessories were available to all American women, who could purchase a wardrobe within any budget directly in stores or by mail.<sup>32</sup>

Fashion shows were not unheard of in the Soviet Union. Accounts indicate that they were traditional in nature, consisting of individual models walking down a runway wearing practical fashions in neutral colours, none of which were made available to the public.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the ANEM's fashion show consisted of eleven skits set to background music, highlighting everyday scenes or special events in the lives of American women. Fashions were creative and colourful, without being overly ostentatious. The first skit began with models in clothing they wore in their everyday lives, whether at home, work or school. The second focused on leisure clothing, including bathing suits, camping clothes, golf attire and ski wear (Figure 3). Other skits included high fashions, travel attire, clothing for teenagers, a rock 'n' roll routine, a barbeque, a square dance, and the little black dress accessorized in different ways. The show concluded with a church wedding.<sup>34</sup> The *New York Times* wrote that the wedding drew the most enthusiasm among visitors. Russian women watched it with smiles, sympathized with the mother of the groom as she wiped away her tears and cried "Gorko," a custom calling for the bride and groom to kiss.<sup>35</sup> The assumption was that in the Soviet Union, just like everywhere else, weddings were joyful occasions that warranted grand celebrations. This skit centered structure appeared both unique and entertaining to Russian women. As one commented "We love the way you show your clothes – it's like going to the theatre." A salesgirl was said to exclaim "We have never seen such way to show clothes. We see not only clothes but through your music and pantomime understand American way of life."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Fashion Industries Presentation of the American National Exhibition, 25 July through 5 September 1959;" Box 2; Arrivals – Exhibit Representatives Through Chron June; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See John Steinbeck and Robert Capa, *A Russian Journal* (New York: Penguin Books, 1948); Emmett John Hughes, "A Perceptive Reporter in a Changing Russia," *Life*, 8 February 1954.

<sup>34</sup> Gloria Emerson, "US Show Marked by Wide Variety," *New York Times*, 13 July 1959.

<sup>35</sup> Tobia Frankel, "US Fashion Show Baffles Russians," *New York Times*, 27 July 1959.

<sup>36</sup> Telegram from Freers to Secretary of State, 8 September 1959; Box 7; Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306;

US media reported on the immense popularity of the fashion show, claiming that Russian women were pleased with both the fashions and appearance of the models. Indeed, each show attracted an audience of three to five thousand visitors.<sup>37</sup> USIA writer Linda Salzman reported that Russians admired the quality and affordability of the clothing. She wrote that “typical” clothing Russian women may wear themselves, such as work clothes and shoes, sparked the most interest, while lavish clothing such as evening gowns and bridal wear seemed to be less popular (Figure 4). Although the audience enjoyed viewing the latter, they could not imagine owning such things themselves. Instead, one Russian woman claimed that the clothing seemed “like something we see in a picture book.”<sup>38</sup> The only aspect of the fashion show that Russian women seemed disappointed in was the fact that the clothing was not for sale, with Salzman reporting they inquired where they could purchase the clothing for themselves.<sup>39</sup> Visitor comment books, placed throughout the exhibition, can also tell us much about women’s views of the fashion show and perhaps the overall effectiveness of the exhibition. The CP encouraged visitors to tow the official party line regarding the exhibition. However, there is strong evidence that women enjoyed those displays that were geared towards them specifically, particularly in a society that minimized their femininity in favour of a promised “gender equality.” For example, one woman wrote, “I liked very much your fashion show. Elegant, beautiful.” Another commented that she was “very pleased with the fashion show; wish you great success.”<sup>40</sup>

The fashion show’s forty-seven models also proved popular. *The New York Times* reported that organizers carefully selected attractive individuals that not only presented well, but also conveyed a wholesome, all-American image that could more easily relate to the audience. Thirty-nine had never worked professionally, including three entire families, and varied in their ages, sizes, socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations.<sup>41</sup> The issue of race became an important one given the state of domestic race relations. Three African American models were hired: Jacqueline Clay, a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Gilbert Noble, an office worker, and his fiancée, Norma Jean Johnston, a registered nurse.<sup>42</sup> Organizers included them in two skits, at a barbeque and a wedding. At an advanced viewing, New York City fashion editors criticized their inclusion as guests at the wedding, arguing that it did not reflect “real life” in America.

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NACP.

<sup>37</sup> Frankel, “Russians Swarm through US Fair.”

<sup>38</sup> Linda Salzman; Box 1; Airgrams and Cables Through Radio and TV Coverage; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Visitors Comments on ANE in Moscow 25 July – 5 September 1959; Box 11, p. 11; Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to US Exhibits in the USSR, Rumania and Bulgaria; Office of Exhibits; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>41</sup> Emerson, “47 American Models Going to Russia are Survivors of Rugged Competition.”

<sup>42</sup> “Models in Russia: Three Negro Models Share Spotlight with 47 Others at Moscow Exhibit,” *Daily Defender*, 27 July 1959.

However, the organizing committee rebuffed these criticisms, choosing to keep the integrated scene.<sup>43</sup> This decision reflected the organizers' overall approach to race relations, not just at the fashion show, but throughout the exhibition: seldom addressed, but when it was, it was presented in such a manner that conveyed a portrait of harmonious race relations. This approach lent itself to a more positive narrative of American life rather than its reality.

No matter the model, their appearance elicited a degree of curiosity. Salzman noted that perhaps the most popular model was Grace Moran, who represented the typical American grandmother. She was especially popular amongst "babushkas," the Russian term for a grandmother. They loved her figure, wanted to see pictures of her grandchildren and were amazed at how young and active she seemed at age sixty. One Russian woman told Salzman that Moran reminded them of Catherine the Great, but with a better figure.<sup>44</sup> Another commented that she was "an example to us of how we can look."<sup>45</sup> According to Salzman, Russian women asked the models a plethora of questions, such as how they maintained their soft skin, the types of cosmetics they used, and if they actually dressed as portrayed in the show.<sup>46</sup> Others admired their slender frames, with one Russian woman observing "You look thin but healthy. We are glad you are not like macaroni. But you could be a little fatter anyways!"<sup>47</sup> To the media, there was no denying the desire of Russians to speak to the models, which they likened to the American fascination with celebrity culture. In fact, unlike the guides who already had a knowledge of Russian, the models were taught the language on a basic level so they could communicate with visitors.<sup>48</sup> Clay recalled that they gathered after the shows to ask for autographs and invite them to restaurants and clubs.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to fashion, the ANEM showcased hair and beauty treatments. Coiffures Americana, a hair salon, had stylists who provided complimentary haircuts and permanent waves. The *New York Times* reported that Russian women eagerly volunteered to fill the chairs to have their hair done in a "new look from the New World."<sup>50</sup> Klava Verkasova, a thirty one year old electrician who helped to construct the display, and her eight-year-old daughter Alla, were among the females who visited. Klava was so pleased with her daughter's haircut that she asked the stylist to take a Polaroid picture of her.<sup>51</sup> The hair salon shared a circular pavilion run by Helena Rubenstein. Beauty experts from her Fifth Avenue salon in New

<sup>43</sup> "Racial Mixing Assailed in Fashion Show for Moscow," *New York Times*, 20 July 1959.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Linda Salzman; Box 1; Airgrams and Cables Through Radio and TV Coverage; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; Records of the US Information Agency, RG 306.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Frankel, "Russians Swarm through US Fair."

<sup>49</sup> Nedra Rhone, "Black Model Remembers Time in Russia during Cold War," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 23 March 2012.

<sup>50</sup> "Soviet Women Delighted by Fair's Beauty Salon," *New York Times*, 27 July 1959.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

York serviced not only the models in the fashion show but also Russian women, who were invited to receive complimentary skin treatments and makeovers. It had an open circular booth with chairs and makeup tables facing outward from the center, allowing Russian women in the crowd to observe.<sup>52</sup> Coty, Inc., the cosmetics and perfume manufacturer, also operated a beauty salon where women received a complexion analysis and a free makeover, with options to choose from fourteen shades of face powder and eighteen shades of lipstick.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Coty intended to distribute one million free samples of these products.<sup>54</sup> These beauty displays and giveaways were intended to demonstrate to female visitors the vast array of beauty products available to American women, as well as to enable them to take these products home, where they could be shown to female family and friends who may not have attended the exhibition, thus generating curiosity and even demand for these products. Companies such as Coty sought expansion, and an event such as the ANEM offered an opportunity to potentially penetrate the Soviet market. However, shortly before the exhibition began Soviet officials prohibited the distribution of all cosmetics and food samples, effectively stifling any potential for this expansion.<sup>55</sup> At the time, there was little explanation provided for this decision; however, the ban on both cosmetics and food samples underscores the importance that both American and Soviet officials placed on women as consumers. As the primary, if not the exclusive buyers of beauty products and food, they possessed the power to exert considerable influence in these sectors, which were perceived as lacking in the Soviet Union.

The US media often asserted that Russian women were unfeminine not due to their personal choice to forego cosmetics, but rather because the Soviet government failed to provide these products, as the above mentioned circumstances suggest. In reality, beauty products were accessible to Russian women, but only through *TeZhe*, a state run manufacturer created in 1921; however, as Olga Kravets and Ozlem Sanikci note, they bore little comparison to the more luxurious beauty products available in the West.<sup>56</sup> To Americans, the prohibition of Coty products at the ANEM appeared to signify yet another instance of the Soviet government's stronghold on their women, through depriving them of suitable beauty products. Joyce Klain, a twenty-two year old Radcliffe College student who worked at the beauty salon indicated that Russian women indeed aspired to appear feminine. She observed that those she saw at the exhibition and in her travels throughout Moscow seemed to use even more cosmetics than American women, although the products were inferior and more expensive than in America. While stationed at the beauty salon, Klain noted that it was extremely popular with female

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<sup>52</sup> Ruth Wagner, "Soviet Women to Get Free Looks," *The Washington Post*, 12 July 1959.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> "Russians Feel, Thump, Sit Upon and Above All Price US Goods," *New York Times*, 1 August 1959.

<sup>55</sup> The only US product that was permitted for distribution at the exhibition was Pepsi-Cola.

<sup>56</sup> Olga Kravets and Ozlem Sandikci, "Marketing for Socialism: Soviet Cosmetics in the 1930s," *Business History* 87 (Autumn 2013): 465.

visitors requesting up dos, facials and cosmetics and in general going “wild” over American cosmetics and clothing. (Figure 4).<sup>57</sup> Similarly, a State Department telegram seemed to reinforce the notion that Russian women lacked access to cosmetics and wanted to appear feminine, as it reported that women watched the application of eye makeup and mascara with interest, asking the beauticians if all American girls wore such makeup. The response was “Yes, of course.” When Russian women inquired if all American girls looked like the models, the common reply was “Many American girls are beautiful but are more attractive through the use of cosmetics.”<sup>58</sup> These replies would instill in Russian women the notion that beauty was only enhanced through the application of cosmetics. Reports of this nature suggested that women everywhere sought beauty products, and Russian women were no exception to this desire. If given the opportunity, every woman would eagerly embrace the opportunity to appear more beautiful, and as a result, more closely aligned with Western notions of femininity.

### Highlighting the Happy and Hard-Working Homemaker

The home, and the wife and mother at the center of this home, also assumed a central role at the ANEM. The ANEM’s inclusion of a single-family model home and model apartment acted as an advertisement for the American dream of home ownership. Cristina Carbone argues that the model home, and its kitchen in particular, became the USIA’s most crucial instrument of cultural diplomacy at the exhibition and even during the Cold War. It became an iconic symbol in the American and Soviet race toward scientific, technological and cultural domination.<sup>59</sup> Built by All-State Properties Inc., it was priced at fourteen thousand to reflect the home of an average American family living in the suburbs (Figure 5).<sup>60</sup> Its main floor consisted of a front corridor with a coat closet, a kitchen, open living and dining room, three bedrooms and two bathrooms. (Figure 6).<sup>61</sup> All-State paid for the cost of construction and shipping the home to Moscow and re-constructing it.<sup>62</sup> The home also contained five thousand dollars in furnishings provided by Macy’s.<sup>63</sup> Famously, it became known as “Splitnik” because it was split down the middle with a ten-foot wide corridor so visitors could walk through

<sup>57</sup> Rose O’Brien, “Norway Girl Tells Experiences as US Guide in Moscow,” *Lewiston Journal*, 26 September 1959.

<sup>58</sup> Telegram from Llewellyn Thompson, 27 July 1959, Box 7; Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>59</sup> Cristina Carbone, “Staging the Kitchen Debate: How Splitnik Got Normalized in the United States,” in Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (eds.) *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology and European Users* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>60</sup> “America Goes to Moscow;” Box 3; Records Relating to the ANE, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>61</sup> David L. Bowen, “‘Luxury’ \$14,000 American ‘Splitnik’ Off to Moscow Fair: Official Consternation Basement Version Provided,” *Washington Post*, 6 June 1959.

<sup>62</sup> Walter H. Stern, “Moscow Will See L.I. Ranch House,” *New York Times*, 12 March 1959.

<sup>63</sup> A.E. Hotchner, “Mr. Mac Goes to Moscow,” *This Week Magazine*, 19 July 1959.

it. Naturally, the model home generated criticism from the Soviet media before the exhibition even opened. The Soviet media went to extraordinary lengths to assure people that the home's pristine furnishings and advanced technological displays were not widely available to the average American.<sup>64</sup> The Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), the official news agency of the Soviet Union, warned its readers that there was "no more truth in showing this as a typical home of the American worker than in showing the Taj Mahal as the 'typical' home of a Bombay textile worker."<sup>65</sup> Despite the controversy surrounding Splitnik, it became one of the ANEM's most visited exhibits, consistently attracting long lines.<sup>66</sup> Of course, long lines do not necessarily signify approval, but they do reflect a degree of interest. In addition to the Soviet media's rapid dismissal of Splitnik's supposed reflection of the typical American home, it has been well documented that a devastated postwar Moscow lacked the housing and infrastructure to accommodate its rapidly growing population. Urbanites often had little choice but to live in small communal apartments, known as *kommunalka*, where tenants shared kitchens and bathrooms.<sup>67</sup> As a result, it was almost inevitable that this comparatively spacious single-family home would generate curiosity.

USIA officials and exhibition organizers also showcased technological advancement in areas where it assisted homemakers in alleviating their daily tasks. These displays reflected how technology was used to raise their standard of living and provide comfort and convenience. They did this most prominently through the exhibition's four kitchens. Both the model home and model apartment contained kitchens, each sponsored by General Electric and Westinghouse, and known as the "kitchen of today." They showed Russian women the electric appliances that were used in millions of American homes. A third kitchen was known as the RCA Whirlpool Miracle Kitchen, or the "kitchen of tomorrow." It contained a minimalist design with futuristic appliances and gadgets that operated with the touch of a button. A woman could prepare a complete meal without leaving her seat with the help of a "mechanical maid" and an "automatic meal maker."<sup>68</sup> For cleaning, she had a mobile dishwasher and a self-propelled floor cleaner (Figure 7).<sup>69</sup> Finally, the exhibition also included a General Foods-General Mills demonstration kitchen where women prepared convenience foods as well as classic comfort foods (Figure 8). A mock supermarket showed Russian women how American women could enter and purchase a variety of

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<sup>64</sup> Osgood Caruthers, "US Fair Whetting Soviets Curiosity," *New York Times*, 12 July 1959.

<sup>65</sup> Hotchner, "Mr. Mac Goes to Moscow."

<sup>66</sup> Osgood Caruthers, "US Fair Whetting Soviets Curiosity."

<sup>67</sup> For more on postwar Soviet housing, see Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life After Stalin* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013) and Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life During the Khrushchev Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "Electronic 'Kitchen of Future' Slated to East Household Tasks," *New York Times*, 12 February 1959.

convenient items, such as frozen foods, canned fruits and vegetables and cake mixes at affordable prices. They could then turn to the demonstration kitchen to see how an American woman could create a full dinner using these products within minutes. General Mills and General Foods, two of America's largest food manufacturers, collaborated and shipped more than seven tons of food to be prepared. USIA officials intended to distribute these food items and meals to visitors; however, as Soviet officials banned their distribution shortly before the exhibition, just as they had with cosmetics, these food items were made and simply put on display.<sup>70</sup> They pointed out that since they were not in charge of the refreshment stands provided at their own New York exhibition, reciprocity would have to be observed.<sup>71</sup> As a result, these foods were made and simply put on display. Marylee Duerhing, General Mill's supervisor of product counsellors in the Betty Crocker Kitchens at General Mills, and Barbara Sampson of General Foods, oversaw the demonstration kitchen. They led a nine-person team that showed Russian women how easily American women could prepare meals using convenience foods. Duerhing spent her time at the exhibition baking, making General Mills pre-packaged layered cake mixes and pies, while Sampson prepared Birdseye frozen foods including potatoes, squash, green peas and beans.<sup>72</sup> The kitchen's team also prepared and displayed classic comfort foods such as fried chicken and biscuits.

According to a USIA press release, these food demonstrations were extremely popular. "The demonstrating, the processing, handling and preparing of foods command rapt attention. The kitchen where these convenience foods are demonstrated is jammed from morning until night. The cake mixes and frozen foods are of deep interest not only to housewives but to Soviet food processors."<sup>73</sup> Duerhing and Sampson described scenes where Russian women crowded around them, sometimes waiting up to two hours to ask questions and view their finished products.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, according to USIA reports, each of these kitchens were crowded from morning until night.<sup>75</sup> The model home's kitchen had been heavily criticized

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<sup>70</sup> "Russians Veto Handouts of US Food and Cosmetics," *The Washington Post*, 10 July 1959.

<sup>71</sup> "Soviets Feel, Thump, Sit Upon and Above All Price US Goods," *New York Times*, 1 August 1959.

<sup>72</sup> Telegram from Llewellyn Thompson to John Foster Dulles, 27 July 1959, Box 7; Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc. Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>73</sup> Ellen Mickiewicz, "Evaluating US Goals at the American National Exhibition in Moscow," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13 no.4 (Fall 2011): 155.

<sup>74</sup> Telegram from Freers John Foster Dulles, 28 August 1959, Box 7; Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>75</sup> Telegram from Freers to Secretary of State, 8 September 1959; Box 7; Exhibits – American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959 (Cables) Thru Exhibits: General Plan, etc; Records Relating to the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1957-1959; RG 306; NACP.

by Khrushchev for its “capitalistic” attitude which suggested that women were relegated to household work. However, visitor comment books are rife with statements indicating Russian women enjoyed viewing household displays and desired the products within them, believing that they could alleviate their daily burdens. A female teacher wrote, “At your exhibition I liked the machines which facilitate the work of women. I especially liked the Miracle Kitchen. It would be nice if such kitchens were mass-produced. And if we could have trade with you.”<sup>76</sup>

Another female visitor wrote:

I came specially from the city of Kursk to see the exhibitions, ours and yours. As a housewife, I want to thank you for your household appliances. I am deeply impressed by the quality of these products and also by the fact how much they facilitate the work of a housewife. I wish that our housewives had the chance to own such things.<sup>77</sup>

Russian women expressed a degree of hope that they too could one day obtain the kitchen technology that assisted American women in their daily lives. One female student wrote, “The miracle kitchen is wonderful! It would be nice to have one.”<sup>78</sup> Another woman wrote, “I was most impressed by the miracle kitchen (I am a woman). And in conclusion – we all want peace. You are very kind and pleasant.”<sup>79</sup> To Russian women dissatisfied with their daily household chores these displays may have, in fact, produced envy.

In contrast, visitor comments in which men identified themselves as such reflected a disapproval at the exhibition’s emphasis on the home and kitchen, even suggesting the items within them were frivolous. In his review of the exhibition, one man wrote, “You Americans want to surprise us with the glitter of your kitchen pans and the fashions which do not appeal to us at all.”<sup>80</sup> Another commented, “Leaving the exhibition I carry with me an impression of glittering metal saucepans.”<sup>81</sup> Others appeared to have been offended by the manner in which the food was prepared and displayed, writing, “Is it possible that you imagine that our women do not know from what to make good and tasty dishes

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<sup>76</sup> Visitors Comments on ANE in Moscow 25 July – 5 September 1959; Box 11, p. 11; Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to US Exhibits in the USSR, Rumania and Bulgaria; Office of Exhibits; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Visitors Comments on ANE in Moscow July 25 – September 5 1959; Box 11, p. 17; Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to US Exhibits in the USSR, Rumania and Bulgaria; Office of Exhibits; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>81</sup> Ralph White, “Soviet Reactions to Our Moscow Exhibit.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23 no.4 (Winter, 1959-1960): 467.

in our conditions?”<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, others used this focus on household technology as an opportunity to address gender equality, asserting, “The ‘Miracle Kitchen’ was brought here unnecessarily; we don’t need it, because we are striving to free our women from kitchen work entirely.”<sup>83</sup> These are just several examples of the numerous comments visitors articulated in these books. In evaluating them, it becomes evident that for large numbers of men these displays appeared to represent yet another example of American excess, particularly those in relation to the home and kitchen, spaces for which men were still not expected to take responsibility, and naturally, may have lacked interest.

Yet, when women explicitly identified themselves as such, they appeared to *approve* of these displays, which were directed to them by a US government that continued to believe the home and kitchen were their domains, and ones for which they wanted responsibility, particularly as modern household technology brought with it increased ease. Moreover, the Soviet government, despite decades long assertions of gender equality, had not yet succeeded in socializing domestic labor, thereby ensuring that household tasks did indeed remain women’s responsibilities. It is evident from visitor comments that both men and women acknowledged this reality of Soviet life, and contributed in perpetuating it. These realities were exacerbated in a postwar Russia characterized by overcrowded communal living conditions, a scarcity of consumer goods, and food shortages. For women in particular, the American home and kitchen, household technology, and convenience foods within it, may have contributed to alleviating the difficult daily responsibilities, or in other words, the “domestic slavery” they continued to face as working wives and mothers.

### **Assessing the American National Exhibition and its Approach to Cultural Diplomacy**

One of the most useful methods of assessing the effectiveness of the exhibition is by viewing it within a framework that emphasizes the importance of cultural diplomacy, or soft power, and most notably its relationship to women and gender. Ultimately, the final assessments made by government officials regarding the exhibition on each side of their respective aisles were rather predictable. Although Eisenhower did not attend the exhibition, he wrote in his 1963 memoirs that “Our Moscow exhibition served a constructive purpose by bringing thousands upon thousands of Soviet men, women and children face to face with the products of American industry and above all with American citizens.”<sup>84</sup> In contrast, Soviet leaders believed the exhibition was largely a failure. In his own 1970 memoirs, Khrushchev expressed his belief that the US was not serious about displaying

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<sup>82</sup> Visitors Comments on ANE in Moscow July 25 – September 5 1959, 27; Box 11, p. 27; Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to US Exhibits in the USSR, Rumania and Bulgaria; Office of Exhibits; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>83</sup> Visitors Comments on ANE in Moscow, August 8 – 21 1959; Box 11; Comment Books and Lists of Visitors Related to US Exhibits in the USSR, Rumania and Bulgaria; Office of Exhibits; RG 306; NACP.

<sup>84</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City: Double Day, 1963), 410.

American life and culture, and instead “They were more interested in drumming up a lot of propaganda.” He criticized the USIA’s strategy of showcasing American products in a manner that reflected modern advertising techniques, claiming that everything was laid out attractively to impress the public, but it was too “showy and promotional.”<sup>85</sup> This assessment differed from his opening night remarks, a speech that appeared on the front of *Pravda*, the Soviet Union’s leading newspaper, the following day. He stated that it “was very large and, in general, made a good impression,” pointing out that it had many interesting items, rather notably referring to household goods. He admitted that in attending the exhibition he experienced a degree of envy, but a good envy, because he wanted to have the same items available in his own country as soon as possible.<sup>86</sup> In making such statements, Khrushchev admitted that the Soviet government aspired to one day obtain the material items that America’s private sector was already producing for its citizens. Interestingly, following the exhibition, Khrushchev embarked on a two week, fifty-four member tour of the US where he attended various engagements and events that reflected the life and consumer culture he derided during the exhibition.<sup>87</sup>

Considering the often biased nature of official pronouncements, it can be argued that one of the most useful methods of assessing the effectiveness of the exhibition is by viewing it within a framework that emphasizes the importance of cultural diplomacy, or soft power, and most notably its relationship to women and gender. This can be done in analyzing the visitor comment books, which showcase the opinions and writings of ordinary Russians - the ones that US government officials were so eager to reach. Susan Reid, a historian who was also a guide at the exhibition, notes that it would be naïve to see comment books as direct reflections of “what the viewer really thought.” Indeed, it should be acknowledged that analyzing the visitor comments books presents several problems. First, they were placed in public spaces where Soviet officials could watch, read comments and potentially identify those who wrote them. Second, it is probable that some of the comments, at least the unfavourable ones, were those of agitators whose goal was to attend the exhibition and pose as ordinary visitors.<sup>88</sup> Third, positive reactions to the exhibition may have been written as polite comments expressing gratitude to Americans, as their hosts, for holding such an exhibition.<sup>89</sup> In reviewing the comments collectively, it is evident that visitors

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<sup>85</sup> Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1970), 364.

<sup>86</sup> “Speech of N.C. Khrushchev on the Opening in Moscow of the American National Exhibition,” *Pravda*, 25 July 1959, 1-2.

<sup>87</sup> For more on this topic, see Peter Carlson, *K Blows His Top: A Cold War Comic Interlude, Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America’s Most Unlikely Tourist* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009).

<sup>88</sup> Susan E. Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1969.” *Kritika* 9 no.4 (Fall 2008): 874. See also Susan E. Reid, “‘Our Kitchen is Just as Good’: Soviet Responses to the American Kitchen” in *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, edited by Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, 83-112. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 873.

did criticize the exhibition. However, a significant number of comments were positive and reflected a semblance of hope for the future of US-Soviet relations. Even if Russians left the exhibition with their opinions of the American political system itself relatively unchanged, it was clear that many of their comments reflected a desire for the consumer-oriented lifestyle displayed at the exhibition. These sentiments appear to be even more pronounced in the comments written by women. The ANEM's interactive atmosphere, with its countless displays of products that Russian women could witness, touch and use firsthand underscored the notion that consumer goods were accessible, affordable and desirable because of the comfort and convenience they provided. While official pronouncements warrant careful analysis, the individual guides and models further confirmed, through their observations and conversations, that these desires appeared to be present in the many Russian women who visited the exhibition.

The ANEM closed its gates for the final time on 4 September 1959. From the opening day of the exhibition when Nixon and Khrushchev engaged in their famous Kitchen Debate, to the last, the significance of women, gender and consumption to early Cold War international politics was central. For the USIA, its information program and cultural activities within the Soviet Union were integral to spreading information related to traditional gender norms and consumer culture for the purposes of winning women's hearts and minds. Through the ANEM, the USIA was able to utilize images of white, middle-class women as feminine wives, mothers and homemakers to demonstrate to Russian women the supposed advantages of the "American way of life." USIA and other government officials that attended the exhibition firmly believed that this extraordinary event whetted the appetites of Russian women for consumer goods and a higher standard of living. In 1960, the Operations Coordinating Board, created in 1953 as an adjunct body of the National Security Council, affirmed that international fairs and exhibitions played an important role in Free World-Communist Bloc competition.<sup>90</sup> While previous fairs promoted trade between nations and businesses, by 1959 they had become crucial platforms for the exchange and competition of ideas and values.<sup>91</sup> These factors, combined with Khrushchev's openness toward consumer reform, contributed to the Soviet government's subsequent efforts under his leadership to increase the availability of consumer goods and raise living standards. In these ways, cultural diplomacy and its accompanying initiatives, although perceived as trivial by some, should be reconsidered and given greater prominence in discussions surrounding the Cold War. While a short-term event, the effects of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, with its vast consumer displays intended to appeal to women, had long-term ramifications. It acts as a microcosm demonstrating the effectiveness of "soft power" in selling culture, swaying public opinion, and sowing the seeds of unrest, all of which ultimately contributed to the destabilization of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>90</sup> "A Report on Trade Fair Program Fiscal Year 1960." 5 October 1960; Box 2, p. 1; White House, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs: Records, 1952-1961; Operations Coordinating Board Central Files; DDE Library.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

**About the Author:**

Diana Cucuz is currently an adjunct professor in the Department of History at Toronto Metropolitan University. She received her PhD in history at York University in 2017. She specializes in American, women's and cultural history, and the intersections of foreign policy with domestic politics, society, and culture. Her first book, *Winning Women's Hearts and Minds: Selling Cold War Culture in the US and the USSR* (2023), focuses on the ways in which the US government and media politicized women, traditional gender roles, and consumer culture during the early Cold War. It used print culture, through *Amerika* magazine, to persuade Russian women of the superiority of the American way of life. She is currently working on her second manuscript, on 1959's American National Exhibition in Moscow, to further demonstrate the ways in which the US government's use of cultural diplomacy and soft power, through the exhibition, were integral to early Cold War efforts to gradually undermine and destabilize the Soviet regime.

## Appendix



Figure 1. ANEM Floor plan, 1959. Source: National Archives at College Park.



Figure 2. Original caption: “Even black pepper is a precious commodity here,” Russian sewing woman felt that she was well paid for day’s work with three bars of soap and tin of pepper. These typical housewives were photographed in Vyborg. Boots are felt valenkis. Source: Blackstar, *Ladies Home Journal*, April 1952.



Figure 3. American models ranging in ages displaying their leisure wear at the ANEM.  
Source: Library of Congress.



Figure 4. Russian women waiting in line to receive makeovers at the ANEM.  
Source: NACP

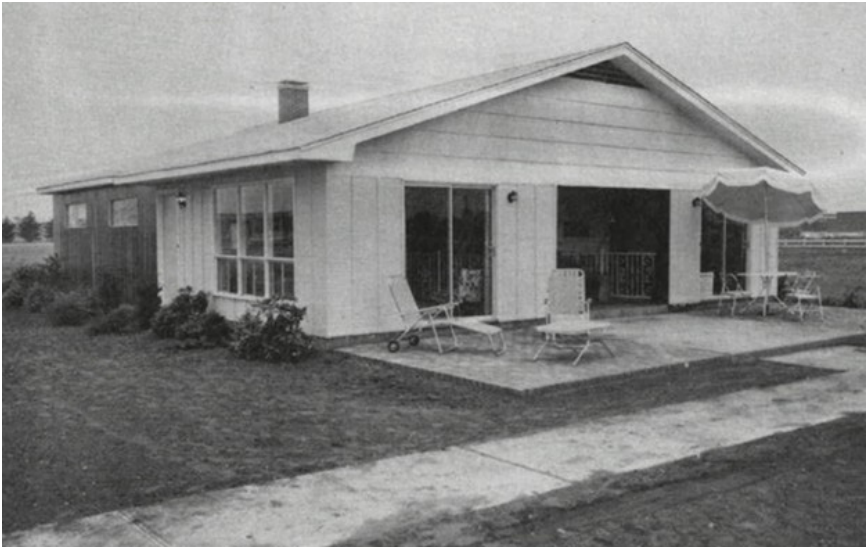


Figure 5: Exterior of the model home with its gates splitting it down the middle, giving it the nickname “Splitnik,” shown at the ANEM. Source: NACP

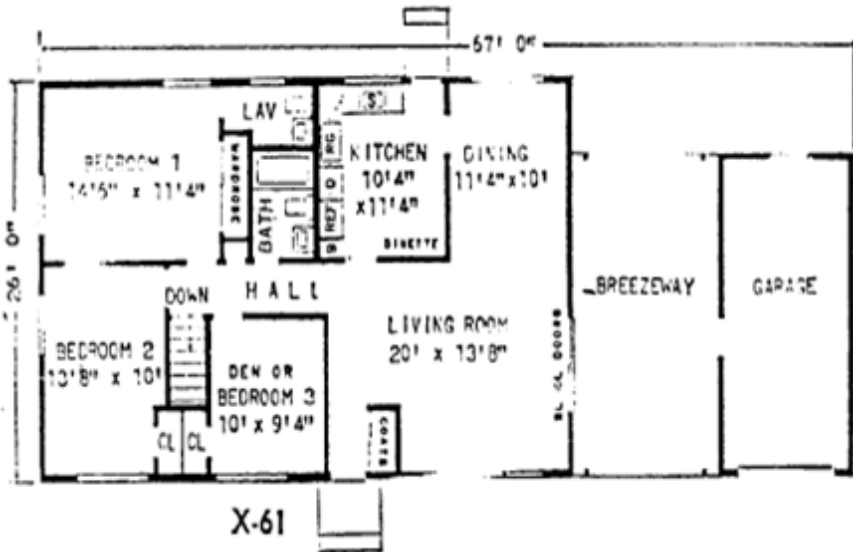


Figure 6. Floor plan of the model home shown at the ANEM. Source: *Washington Post*, 6 June 1959.



Figure 7. Overview of the RCA Whirlpool Miracle Kitchen displayed at the ANEM. Source: NACP.



Figure 8. Marylee Duerhing, General Mills' supervisor of product counsellors in the Betty Crocker Kitchens, prepares convenience foods before a Soviet audience at the ANEM. Source: NACP.

## Book Reviews

Thomas Graham, *Getting Russia Right*, New York: Polity Press, 2023, 259 pp. Index \$25.00, Paper.

Amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Thomas Graham's *Getting Russia Right* thoroughly explains Russia's complex history and motives, illustrates the flaws of the American foreign policy concerning Russia since the Cold War's end and presents guidelines for managing relations to reach peace again.

Chapter by chapter, the CFR distinguished fellow and former NSC senior director for Russia, discusses a different aspect of today's US-Russia troubled relations. First, he shows the opposing worldviews that Russia and the US have in essence, emanating from each great power's foundation: Russia was founded under the premise of expanding defensively to survive weather and geographical vulnerabilities, while the US expanded to fulfil the collective idea of finding freedom in a new land. Thus, the Russian positioning in foreign affairs has always concerned control and security interests, while the American goals are connected to ideology diffusion and democratic values abroad.

Furthermore, the figure of Putin is presented as the indispensable Russian leader for a strong, centralized state. Putin's figure is meant to unify a tough land, create multiethnic cohesion through patriotism, manage the oligarchy, emulate and then control the public opinion and monitor existential threats to avoid collapse. In this rhetoric, a pro-Western Ukraine represented a challenge for Russia's plans of building a buffer against Europe and consolidating this strong state defensive of international threats.

Several mistakes are evidenced throughout different US presidential administrations and their foreign policy concerning Russia. Clinton attempted to ignite a free-market democracy in Russia which ended in the ruble collapsing back in 1998 (158). Bush declared war on world terrorism but used double standards when fighting al-Qaida but not supporting efforts to tackle other Russia-declared terrorist organizations (160). During Obama, the Libya intervention left Russia skeptical of the intentions behind foreign interventionism, since a regime change and the murder of Gaddafi was disguised as humanitarian intervention in 2011 (160). These are all illustrated as major missteps for the US-Russia alliance.

*Getting Russia Right* also introduces guidelines to manage the war in Ukraine. The author advises to focus on prioritizing strategic stability, European security and countering China by engaging a strong Russia, arming Europe for defense and establishing strategic neutrality in Ukraine. A Russia that is strong, stable and allied to the US is convenient for the advancement of the American foreign policy as it can help advance peace in Europe, balance the growing Chinese influence and even create conditions to tackle climate change in the current day.

This book fills a very important gap in the literature as it refrains from blaming Russia as the only cause of numerous tensions in Eurasia, including the current war in Ukraine; and it rather illustrates the complexity of international affairs as they evolved over the years following the collapse of the USSR. The text is innovative because it explains the role of US foreign policy and eastwards ideological expansion in shaping Russia's agenda towards the West. This book

carefully explains how each US presidential administration aimed to democratize Russia and turn it into an ally, instead of giving Russia what it wanted the most; to be acknowledged as one of the great powers.

Something briefly mentioned in the book's epilogue but that could use further discussion, is the role of the Global South and the repercussions the war in Ukraine has in world regions where US foreign policy is conflictive, but the Russian agenda has been more forgiving (204). African countries that remain within their former colonizers' tight influence ratio or Latin American countries that face US-imposed economic sanctions, not only limited to Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, but also countries like Ecuador and Colombia, are a clear example of state actors looking for counterbalance. Russian soft power strategies include free higher education programs, Russian language courses and medical and agricultural training to create strong Russia-Global South ties. Here, like Graham showed in his argument about the partnership of Russia and China, what unites these countries with Russia is turbulent relations with the US, the hostilities and lack of sufficient opportunities in the global North; and the open window of opportunities that Russia represents. The battle for influencing the Global South is also a crucial part of US-Russia foreign affairs that should not be underestimated.

The analysis' main idea is that Russia views the war in Ukraine through a security lens, justifying its actions as essential for protecting its borders and historical buffers against global threats. In contrast, the US frames it as an ideological battle to share democratic values, considering Russia's moves to be imperialist aggression that don't match American values of freedom and global order. The contrast of safety geopolitics with the contest of ideas defines the conflict's main tension.

*Getting Russia Right* is an informative and compelling read to avoid repeating foreign policy mistakes. Understanding Russia's origins, its goals and desires; makes negotiation and conjoint policy building feasible for the parties involved. Failing to get Russia right has historically led to hatred, world chaos and war. It is up to future policy makers to understand Russia as a potential ally for the West but always as a power with agency and firm positionings. Doing so properly will lead to a more peaceful future where Western and Eastern worldviews can coexist and even be mutually reinforcing.

Paula M. Garcia  
St.Petersburg University

Tec de Monterrey

*From Words to War: Ukraine in the Russian Press, 2014–2022*, Minneapolis: East View Press, 2025, xxxv. 397 pp. Index. \$74.95. Paper.

*From Words to War*, attempts to highlight the rhetorical and ideological environment in Russia during the years leading up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As the publisher's preface explains, the central question guiding the collection is deceptively simple: "what prompted the Russian invasion of Ukraine?" (p. xi) Rather than offering a conventional narrative history

or analytical monograph, the editors assemble a documentary reader composed largely of texts drawn from Russian-language journalism, commentary, and political analysis written between 2014 and 2022.

The premise is the obvious point that the origins of the war cannot be understood solely through diplomatic developments or military events but must also be examined through the narratives, arguments, and rhetorical frameworks that circulated within Russian public discourse during the years preceding the invasion. The preface emphasizes that the volume draws primarily on materials originally published in Russia, many of them appearing in newspapers, online publications, and political commentary outlets in the Russian language, which are presented here in translation to provide readers direct access to the arguments and interpretations that shaped Russian discussion of Ukraine during this period (p. xii). What process they used to select these sources is unstated.

The volume argues, again this seems in retrospect obvious, that the war was preceded by years of rhetorical escalation and narrative construction in which Ukraine's political developments, particularly the events of 2014, were interpreted and reframed within Russian media discourse in ways that increasingly normalized confrontation and later war. The introduction develops this framework further by situating the 2022 invasion within a longer trajectory of tensions between Russia and Ukraine rooted in competing historical narratives, contested national identities, cultural polemics, and disagreements over geopolitical alignment between Russia, Europe, and the broader Western alliance system.

The editors note that although the invasion shocked much of the world, scholars of the region clearly recognized that the conflict emerged from developments that had been unfolding for years, particularly after the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv (2014) and the subsequent annexation of Crimea. According to the introduction, these events generated an intense debate within Russian political and media commentary, as journalists, analysts, and public intellectuals attempted to interpret Ukraine's political transformation and its implications for Russian interests and identity (p. xvi).

One of the book's central arguments, therefore, is that examining these debates allows readers to understand how a particular narrative of the conflict took shape within Russian public discourse, a narrative that framed Ukraine's post-Maidan government as illegitimate, emphasized Western interference, and portrayed Russia's aggressive actions as defensive or historically justified. To illustrate the development of these narratives, the editors organize the book into six thematic sections that broadly follow the chronological progression of the conflict.

The first part focuses on the upheaval of 2014 and the immediate aftermath of the Maidan protests, presenting Russian media commentary on the collapse of Viktor Yanukovich's government, the political upheaval in Kyiv, and the annexation of Crimea (p. xv). These documents reveal how Russian commentators attempted to interpret the revolutionary events in Ukraine and how early narratives about the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian government began to take shape.

The second part shifts to the conflict in eastern Ukraine, examining commentary on the war in the Donbas region and the evolving political and military standoff between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists. Here the documents reflect debates about the nature of the conflict, the increasingly destabilizing role of Russia, and the broader geopolitical stakes of the confrontation.

A third section explores the diplomatic and geopolitical dimension of the crisis, including commentary on the Minsk agreements, NATO expansion, and Russia's increasingly confrontational relationship with the West. These texts reveal how the conflict in Ukraine was increasingly framed within Russian discourse as part of a broader geopolitical struggle rather than as a localized regional dispute.

The final part of the volume turns to the period immediately preceding the 2022 invasion, presenting commentary that reflects the increasingly polarized and militarized rhetoric that characterized Russian discussions of Ukraine in the final years before the outbreak of full-scale war. Through this structure, the editors attempt to demonstrate how narratives about Ukraine developed over time and how those narratives contributed to the broader ideological environment in which the invasion ultimately occurred.

*From Words to War* leaves certain methodological questions unresolved. While the editors emphasize that the documents come from a range of Russian publications and viewpoints, they do not address how specific sources were selected or how representative they are of the broader Russian media landscape, an issue that becomes particularly significant given the dramatic transformation of that landscape between 2014 and 2022 as independent journalism came under increasing pressure and state-aligned narratives gained ever greater prominence.

By presenting contemporary texts rather than detailed retrospective analysis, the volume, valuably, allows readers to observe the language of the crisis as it unfolded, capturing the immediacy and tone of Russian commentary during the years leading to war. Because the editors offer relatively limited analytical framing, readers draw their own conclusions about the relationship between these texts and the broader political structures that shaped Russian media discourse during this period.

Critics of Kremlin policy, including Kirill Rogov, Sergei Medvedev, Lilia Shevtsova, and Tatiana Stanovaya, contribute some of the most forceful and intellectually engaging essays in this edited volume. Their sharply argued interventions supply much of the collection's analytical energy and provide what limited interpretive framework the volume possesses. Vladimir Putin's essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (pp. 346–63) and his address of February 24, 2022, announcing the "special military operation" against Ukraine (pp. 376–84), although readily available elsewhere in translation, serve as fitting codas to the collection.

*From Words to War* functions less as a strong explanation of the causes of the invasion than as a documentary record of the arguments, narratives, and assumptions that circulated within (a not clearly delineated) Russian public discussion of Ukraine in the eight years between the Maidan revolution and the full-scale invasion of 2022. Despite its limitations, this volume offers scholars and readers, without knowledge of Russian, a valuable, open-ended, window into the discursive environment from which the war emerged.

Steven A. Usitalo  
Northern State University

Andrew Hartman, *Karl Marx in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025, 594pp. Index, \$39.00, Hardcover.

Andrew Hartman (Illinois State University) has produced a mammoth study of the image and reality of Karl Marx in America. He outlines from the beginning that there are many images and perceptions of Marx in American history. Hartman even goes as far to say that Marx is a ghost who has haunted both friends and foes alike as they contemplated the American project.

The book is organized chronologically from Marx's own life itself (1818-1883) to the twenty-first century. In this structure, Hartman highlights the influence Marx had in each era for both supporters and critics alike. The author provides a balanced, yet complicated, picture of how and why Marx engendered so much love and hatred simultaneously in an American population that struggled with the impact of industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century through the new century where wars and revolutions turned American society on its head.

For readers of the *Journal of Russian American Studies (JRAS)*, this might not sound like an obvious book for review, but Hartman highlights the key moments where Marx in America was intertwined with events in Russia and the Soviet Union. Prior to the World War I and Russian Revolution era, Marx was influential on the pages the *New York Daily Tribune* where he wrote nearly 500 articles commenting on a wide range of issues in mid-nineteenth century America. Marx's writing in America is a lesser-known side of the German thinker. By the end of the nineteenth century, many native-born and immigrant Americans were tuning into what Marx had to say, even after his death. To some, he was a heroic figure.

Hartman further expands on Marx's influence in America in a Russian context during the World War I period. He analyzed the role of some of his most faithful adherents during this time. He stressed the voice of John Reed, however short it was, as a proponent of Vladimir Lenin's ideas, and by extension Marx's ideas. Other such notable Americans of the era linked to Marx were labor leader and candidate for president, Eugene V. Debs, and the black labor leaders, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. All these American writers and leaders had a version of Marx in their heads as they led their own movements for social change in America. Marx, though, said different things to different people. There were other Americans in this era who also advocated for Marx's overall ideological position that received little or no attention in Hartman's book like Lincoln Steffens, Anna Louise Strong, and Albert Rhys Williams.

The Russian theme arose later in Hartman's book coming out of World War II and as the Cold War began. The Red Scare era after World War II reshaped American thinking about the Soviet world and created a fear of all things left-wing left an indelible mark on the American political scene for decades. Hartman focuses much on his attention on American left-wing thinker, Michael Harrington, and his promotion of radical ideas in a time when most Americans were not that receptive to them.

Overall, Hartman's work is a tremendous undertaking. It is well-researched and thoughtfully written in an excellent work that explains one of the most controversial thinkers in modern American life. Like any book, a reviewer could quibble with the focus in certain areas, but the author has done a real service to the reading public by trying to explain who Karl Marx was, how his ideas were

transmitted in America, sometimes through Russian and other intermediaries, and his overall impact on American society. This is an excellent study worthy of a wide readership and a lively debate.

William B. Whisenhunt  
Emeritus, College of DuPage

## Field Notes

**1. February 2026, Arts Council of Princeton, NJ -- Screening and Discussion. *America Unfiltered: Portraits and Voices of a Nation.*** This film about America is made by a filmmaker from Panama and from **Russia -- Kirill Myltsev** (Co-creator, Writer, Writer-Director) Please see the [announcement](#) here. Screening at Princeton University on February 14, 2026.

**2. January - February 2026.**

Here is the [link](#) to the [site](#) with the details about this play based on **Dovlatov's Чемолян**, staged at Hunter College, CUNY, New York, John Hancock Hall, Boston, Lauderhill Performing Arts Center, Miami, Joan B. Kroc Theatre, San Diego, Wilshire Ebell Theatre, Los Angeles, Fox Theatre, Redwood City, near San Francisco in January and February 2026.

**3. February - March 2026. New York City Ballet: An extravagant escape set to a glorious Tchaikovsky score**

A landmark in the history of dance, *The Sleeping Beauty* ranks as the supreme achievement of Marius Petipa set to an infinitely melodic score by Tchaikovsky that offered endless inspiration for the choreographer.

**4. "The World, Russia, and the USA: 250 Years of Interaction,"** Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences – May 20, 2026

**5. Society for American Historians of Foreign Relations Annual Meeting,** Ohio State University, June 2026. [https://www.shafr.org/assets/docs/SHAFR\\_2026\\_Draft\\_Program\\_Feb\\_19.pdf](https://www.shafr.org/assets/docs/SHAFR_2026_Draft_Program_Feb_19.pdf)

**6. The Museum of Russian Art – Minnesota**

- A. Spies and Space - <https://tmora.org/2026/01/05/spies-and-space-cold-war-artifacts-from-both-sides-of-the-iron-curtain/>
- B. Frenemy Moments - <https://tmora.org/2025/12/16/frenemy-moments-of-the-cold-war-soviet-american-conversations-in-old-photographs/>

**9. Richard Pipes Memorial Conference, University of Illinois Chicago – April 2026**

Richard Pipes was a pioneering, if sometimes controversial, historian whose work helped shape Russian and Soviet nationalities studies. In advance of Jonathan Daly's forthcoming book, *The Man Who Knew Russia: Richard Pipes, Humanist and Cold Warrior* (Stanford University Press), this conference brings together leading scholars to examine Pipes' legacy and to assess the state of the field across topics of nationalities and imperial history, political thought, and the Russian Revolution.

<https://huminst.uic.edu/events/the-richard-pipes-memorial-conference-the-state-of-the-russian-history-field/>

**10. Special feature on Dr. Lyubov Ginzburg**, JRAS Editorial Board Member!  
<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2025/06/25/nypl-researcher-spotlight-lyubov-ginzburg>

**11. Reissue of Anthem Americans in Revolutionary Russia Series** – all 18 volumes published now!  
[Anthem Press](#)

12. We are pleased to announce the publication of the Russian version of Matt Miller's [The American YMCA and Russian Culture](#) by Academic Studies Press!