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Walter L. Hixson. *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945-1961.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xvi + 283 pp.

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Consumer Culture and the Cold War

The desirability of American symbols and consumer goods in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia was so widely known as to be trite: even staid western guidebooks used to recommend bringing Levi's jeans and Marlboro cigarettes as gifts or an alternate form of currency. But the symbolic importance of American goods did not necessarily rely on imports, legal or otherwise. By the early 1990s, literally dozens of fake Marlboro cigarette brands could be purchased in Moscow's kiosks, all with red and white packages and a typeface similar to Marlboro's. The brand names evoked images of the American West: Cow-Boy, Montana, State Line, Texas, and so on. But some companies's determination to associate their companies' products with the American west exceeded their knowledge of the region. They became somewhat confused about brand names, for example distributing cigarettes called "Mid-West." Russian images of America clearly extended well beyond actual American products.

Walter L. Hixson, a professor of U.S. diplomatic history at the University of Akron, grew interested in such phenomena while teaching for a year at Kazan' State University. His book on the topic is a welcome addition to the literature on the Cold War, offering research and reflections about the projection of American culture abroad. His argument is summarized at the start of the book: "any comprehensive analysis for the end of the East- West struggle will require serious analysis of the role played by Western cultural infiltration" (p. xv). Hixson examines many modes of this "infiltration," providing the first detailed accounts of many institutions and episodes which constituted the fabric of Cold-War life on both sides of the Wall.

The first chapter quickly reviews American information activities after World War II. It offers a useful recounting of the militarization of "information" that accompanied the escalation of Cold War tensions. Propaganda programs didn't garner Congressional attentions–or appropriations–like "psychological warfare" could.

President Truman proposed a new information offensive with the Orwellian title "Campaign of Truth." Hixson traces U.S. foreign information activities through the bureaucratic conflicts of the early Cold War, involving the Psychological Strategy Board, the State Department (whose Secretary, John Foster Dulles, remained deeply skeptical of such programs), and the newly created U.S. Information Agency (USIA).

The next chapter continues in a similar vein, taking the reader through the reactivation of the WWII-era Voice of America (VOA). Here Hixson is at his best in describing the VOA's many threats: first the technological ones growing out of Soviet jamming of radio transmissions in eastern European languages and then the devastating incursions of Senator McCarthy's anti-Communist crusaders. Using arguments parallel to Soviet "wrecking" charges, the senator accused VOA engineers of choosing transmitter locations that they knew would work poorly (p. 53). Programming on the Voice of America consistently emphasized the "good life" available to citizens in capitalist countries. It initially eschewed any sort of neutrality, offering conclusions like "Hell remains Hell, even if painted in communist colors" (p. 40).

In the aftermath of these battles–also spurred by rudimentary audience research–the VOA turned toward a more "objective and factual" tone in 1953. Yet other American radio stations stood ready to take up the battle cry. Chapter Three details the operations of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberation, both of which took an aggressive tone of anti-Soviet propaganda. Run by Americans (including the State Department's "Mr. Eastern Europe" of the interwar period, Robert Kelley) they employed many anti-communist emigres for their on-air staff. Putatively private but in fact funded by the CIA, these stations considered themselves successful to the extent that they were repudiated by eastern European governments.

Chapters Four and Five turn away from the institutional context and focus primarily on the messages sent by these official and semi-official American propaganda organs. Capitalism's superiority over communism, Hixson reports, was "proven" by its ability to provide a high standard of living to its citizens. In spite of diplomatic and congressional reluctance to promote cultural exchanges with the Soviets, a small core of proponents in government and academe stressed the role of media, literature, trade fairs, sports teams and the like as "soldiers in the battle of ideas" (p. 104). Here Hixson adopts the attitude of these proponents, for instance in his description of cultural exchange as "an irrepressible force" in spite of Secretary Dulles's opposition (p. 107).

The shift toward soft-peddling American culture (rather than hitting with aggressive propaganda messages) served the VOA well. Willis Conover's famous "Music USA" show attracted listeners all over eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in spite of Soviet criticisms of its decadent and anarchic implications. Even the Polish government (according to one VOA document) conceded the point: the "building of socialism," one Polish decree went, "proceeds more lightly and more rhythmically to the accompaniment of jazz" (p. 117). Meanwhile, Soviet propaganda attacks on American racism led to American counterclaims. While admitting past problems, the VOA line emphasized (and exaggerated) the extent of recent progress in race relations. In many cases, the issue of race was simply censored from USIA and VOA productions. Programming also took the counter-offensive by promulgating an American vision of "People's Capitalism," in which all Americans (and eventually people the world over) could partake in capitalism's plenty.

The book's most interesting chapters cover the American National Exhibition in 1959 (home of the famous "Kitchen Debate" between Vice President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev) and the 1958 Cultural Agreement which made the exhibition possible. The 1958 pact contained many provisions for cultural exchange besides the exchange of exhibitions which garnered the most attention from contemporaries and historians alike. A range of American performers, for instance, travelled through the USSR in the late 1950s: from musicians Van Cliburn and Paul Robeson to acts such as Bob Hope and the Harlem Globetrotters.

Hixson devotes a whole chapter to the American National Exhibition, marshalling an impressive array of American sources, plus a few key documents from Soviet archives (TsKhSD and MGAOD), to trace the many battles between American and Soviet organizers. [1] Pepsi-Cola was eventually allowed to distribute samples, but Soviet officials were intransigent on other issues, vetoing the distribution of cosmetics samples and the installation of a "really up-to-date, color-tiled restroom" (p. 189). The documents also shed some light on how Soviets experienced the exhibition, combining the recollections of American guides and diplomats with reports from Soviet agitators working at the exhibition. Hixson frequently discounts reports from these agitators, arguing that they "exaggerated their own effectiveness" (p. 197).

The telling of "Six Weeks at Sokolniki" makes the

most of eight Soviet documents which lay out the overarching Soviet policy toward the exhibition (including a series of countermeasures to minimize the exhibition's impact) and also report on the activities of both party agitators and fairgoers. The countermeasures included scheduling numerous other events to coincide with the American exhibition, especially at the newly opened VDNKh (Exhibition of the People's Economic Achievements) (pp. 187-88). But American tickets were, not surprisingly, the most sought-after. Attendance certainly exceeded the 50,000 tickets sold daily–by as much as 50 per cent, by some American estimates (p. 201). By the close of the Sokol'niki exhibition in September, 1959, Hixson claims, Soviet leaders were forced to reckon with their inability to provide anything resembling the cornucopia visible at the American exhibition. He quotes State Department officials who credit the exhibition with bringing about a flurry of Soviet decrees aimed at improving the supply of consumer goods (p. 211). Hixson closes the chapter by arguing that the Sokol'niki exhibition proved to Soviet citizens the emptiness of their government's claims to provide a comfortable standard of living. Soviet citizens may have been patient, giving the system some time to catch up with (if not surpass) the West; the exhaustion of patience, Hixson implies, led to their disaffection and eventually to the end of the Soviet Union (p. 213).

A brief conclusion takes the story up to the fallout from the shooting down of an American U-2 spy plane over Soviet territory in spring 1960. In spite of the mistrust generated by the American actions (including initial denials about the whole incident), cultural exchange programs continued all but unscathed (p. 222). The conclusion also offers a somewhat elliptical critique of "Eisenhower revisionism," a move among some diplomatic historians to improve that president's rather poor reputation for foreign-policy initiatives. Hixson, writing as a partisan of cultural programs, blames Eisenhower for yielding to his Secretary of State and not pushing hard enough on the cultural front.

Hixson has picked an interesting story and told it competently and clearly, but his book is unlikely to satisfy many H-Russia readers. He relies almost exclusively on American sources and his sympathies clearly lie with the Americans promoting "infiltration." Thankfully free from the Cold-War triumphalism which credits the American military build-up with the demise of the USSR, the book nevertheless veers close to a cultural version of it: images of American butter, not guns, helped bring about the collapse. Hixson's key concept, "cultural infiltration," suggests that popular Soviet conceptions of American life (especially standards of living) were the result solely of concerted American efforts at "infiltration." While the 1959 exhibition no doubt increased popular awareness of American goods, Soviets already knew all too well about the lack of consumer goods. Soviet citizens had their own uses, furthermore, for American culture and American comparisons that did not derive directly from the VOA or the Exhibition. Marlboro and Levi's, after all, did not have to advertise in Russia to become symbols of America. Russians (in the USSR and afterwards) could also manufacture such symbols on their own–witness "Mid-West" cigarettes and Hollywood-inspired films like *Deja Vu* (1989).

Richard Stites's survey of Russian popular culture offers a much more Russian-centric view of the role of America in Soviet everyday life, as do works on popular music by S. Frederick Starr and Timothy Ryback.[2] While more recent scholarship on the reception of "Americanism" in western Europe have stressed the ways in which the meanings of America were "domesticated" in each national context, Hixson does not have ready access to the sources necessary to make such an argument.[3] The imbalance in sources yields an argument stressing official American actions over Soviets' responses, official or popular.

While Soviet citizens' dissatisfaction with their standard of living was often expressed in comparison to the West, one can hypothesize that such dissatisfaction might well have existed without any efforts by the U.S. government to "infiltrate" American culture behind the Iron Curtain. Blue jeans, McDonald's, "Dallas" (or more recently, "Santa Barbara"), and CNN may play a large role in post-Soviet life, as Hixson states (p. 228), but that does not necessarily mean that they "followed the trail blazed" by official U.S. organs such as the Voice of America or the USIA magazine *Amerika*. Like the diplomats and propagandists who populate his endnotes, Hixson himself seems quick to credit the USIA for phenomena which may have only a tangential connection to American actions. While offering caveats about the limitations of his evidentiary base, Hixson nevertheless makes arguments beyond the materials at hand.

Yet Hixson is clearly onto something in his portrayal of the Cold War superpowers' competition over consumption. Soviet leaders, once they had promised to meet Western consumption levels, faced a major problem: they could not do so without diverting resources from the military or industrial sectors. Soviet claims to

"catch up and surpass" the west rang more and more false. And so Brezhnevism's ideological validation, the promise of a comfortable life–unlikely from the start–quickly became impossible and eventually the butt of innumerable *anekdoty*. Charles Maier connects this change to the legacies of 1968: the crushing of Prague Spring and the "anarchies loosed by Rock and Roll." [4] Maier's approach has the further virtue of providing a clearer mechanism for Communism's collapse than Hixson's: the generation raised after 1968 came of age with unprecedented cynicism about the Soviet system at a time when the economy (and much else) stagnated amid empty exhortations of ideology.

Hixson has provided a useful and important basis for reinterpreting a less-recognized battleground of the Cold War, the battle over consumption. Working primarily behind the American lines in this book, his few sallies across to the Soviet side suggest the potential payoff of a more Soviet-oriented work on the topic. In the meantime, historians can be grateful for Hixson's "you-were-there" reports on both the bureaucratic and the propaganda elements of the American effort in that battle.

Notes:

[1]. Hixson's account should become the new standard on the American National Exhibition, surpassing Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), chap. 7; Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), chap. 8. Richard Nixon's *Six Crises* (New York: Doubleday, 1962) remains a must-read.

[2]. Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) is especially useful here. See also S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

[3]. Western European examples include Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Victoria de Grazia, "Americanism for Export," *Wedge* 7-8 (winter-spring 1985): 74-81; Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); and Reinhold Wagnleiter, *Coca-Colonisation: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[4]. See Charles S. Maier, "The Collapse of Communism: Approaches for a Future History," *History Workshop Journal* 31 (spring 1991): 34-59.

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