

Kitchen Debate and Cold War Consumer Politics

Introduction: The Kitchen Debate in Historical Context.

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In late July 1959, U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon arrived in Moscow to open the American National Exhibition. The carefully staged six-week exhibit in Moscow's suburban Sokolniki Park, Nixon declared, would provide Soviet citizens "a clearer picture of life in the United States." That "clearer picture" included an astonishing display of the abundance available to American consumers: mass-produced automobiles, color televisions, ranch-style suburban homes. At the heart of the exhibition were several model kitchens stocked with technological gadgetry and modern convenience foods. The kitchens in Sokolniki Park soon became famous the world over as the backdrop for what journalists dubbed the "Kitchen Debate." In one of the most emblematic exchanges of the cold war era, Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev waged a war of words over the respective merits of socialism and capitalism. The Kitchen Debate, centered on the politics and culture of mass consumption, revealed that the cold war was not just a geopolitical confrontation between two nuclear-armed superpowers. It was also a battle for the hearts, the minds, and—perhaps most importantly—the stomachs of citizens in the cold war world.

Soviet visitors to the American National Exhibition in Moscow paid a mere ruble to witness a spectacular display of U.S. economic productivity. Looming over the entrance to the ten-acre pavilion was a space-age, gold-plated geodesic dome. Inside the dome, seven giant screens flashed thousands of images of Americans working, playing, shopping at supermarkets, and driving on interstate highways. Leaving the dome, visitors proceeded to a fifty-thousand-square-foot glass pavilion stuffed from floor to ceiling with American consumer goods. Modern furniture, color televisions, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, wedding dresses, lipstick tubes, plastic wares, gleaming pots and pans—all of these consumer items and many more were dangled before Soviet citizens as "proof of national grandeur" in what one historian has called a "combat of commodities."

Several kitchens prominently displayed in the glass pavilion formed the centerpiece of this consumer propaganda campaign. An RCA/Whirlpool "Miracle Kitchen" provided a glimpse of an imagined future of drudgery-free housework: A robotic floor cleaner and an automated push-button "planning center" would bring the homemaker into the computer age. In another kitchen, home economists demonstrated readymade cake mixes and frozen foods. A small but up-to-date model of an apartment-style American kitchen stood nearby. Other exhibits on display in Sokolniki Park included chrome-laden automobiles, a booth providing free samples of Pepsi-Cola, an IBM RAMAC computer programmed to tout the American way of life, a 360° Circarama movie by Walt Disney, and a prefabricated ranch-style home. Inside the model suburban home was yet another kitchen, sponsored by General Electric. Here, over the six weeks of the exhibition, more than two and a half million Soviet visitors saw firsthand an array of appliances portrayed as essential markers of middle-class status: a dishwasher, garbage disposal, countertop cooking range, and combination refrigerator-freezer. It was in this canary-yellow kitchen that Nixon, pulling Khrushchev close, announced, "I want to show you this kitchen," initiating one of the most memorable diplomatic encounters of the cold war.