



## VISUALIZING THE OTHER

# Media Representations of Nina Khrushcheva during the Khrushchevs' State Visit to the United States in 1959

The mainstream understanding of gender codes is implicitly and explicitly intertwined with the notions of power and subordination. This perception inevitably transforms the concepts of femininity and masculinity into a system of social doctrines that are incorporated into state ideology and become a factor of political propaganda. The gender discourse proved to be an effective weapon of the Cold War and had an important role in the ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The American rhetoric inscribed the faults and failures of the communist system directly on women's bodies, portraying them as unkempt, graceless and asexual. In popular imagination, the image of a Soviet woman became an epitome of the other which both personified the threat of communism and, at the same time, eased domestic anxieties about rigid gender roles in the post-war US.

However, the Cold War was not a homogeneous process. The period from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, which is often referred to as the Khrushchev Thaw, was characterized by the governments' attempts to defuse the tension on the international political stage. Premier Khrushchev's American tour in September 1959 was the first official visit of a high-rank communist leader to the United States, and until 1973 was the only visit of Soviet Premiers to American soil. Such periodicals as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Daily Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* provided exhaustive analysis of the event, paying particular attention to Nina P. Khrushcheva, the wife of the first secretary of the Communist Party, who followed her husband during the official program. The American press accepted this opportunity to humanize the image of an average communist female, introduc-

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ing the idea of different, but not intimidating, femininity. Numerous references to Khrushcheva's modest personality, understated dressing style, focus on her family life behind the iron curtain meant that her public persona came to represent not socialist values but essential human virtues.

This paper will provide contextual analysis of the media representations of Nina Khrushcheva based on newspaper articles that appeared in major American periodicals. How was her style and manners commented on in the press? Which techniques were used to highlight her personality? Did her appearance and behavior challenge what American public considered acceptable for a First Lady? To answer these questions, the author turns to *The New York Times* archive that possesses full reports of the Khrushchevs' visit, including articles by Edith Evans Asbury, who was appointed to write exclusively about Mrs. Khrushcheva's experiences during her two weeks in the United States. The present study suggests that Khrushcheva's image was used by the media to create positive attitude towards the Soviet delegation among the American audience in the time when the society was cautious towards the idea of collaboration between the two super-powers. Soon after September 1959, fragile hopes for amity between the Western and Eastern Blocs were shattered due to the U-2 spy plane scandal in 1960 and the Berlin Crisis of 1961. Nevertheless, the popular narrative about the Soviet femininity had been transformed. The review of Khrushcheva's representation in American periodicals will illustrate how gender codes are influenced by the mass media, and will prove that international policies can gain human face in the press.

#### GENDER DISCOURSE AS A WEAPON OF THE COLD WAR

Achievements in gender studies conducted over the past half-century have made it unquestionable that gender is central in shaping social life. Scientists in most various fields of research underline that "gender is one of the central organizing principles around which social life revolves" (Kimmel xii). As a system of self-identification, gender is intertwined with other types of representation, such as, for example, national, religious, and political identity, and is being influenced by them to the same extent as it is influencing them. The society as we experience it in our daily lives is organized in accordance to a binary gender schema that divides people into two categories, female and male. Any other constituents of social identity are aligned with these major modifiers. As explained by Carol Cohn in "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War," gender is

a symbolic system, a central organizing discourse of culture, one that not only shapes how we experience and understand ourselves as men and women, but that also interweaves with other discourses and shapes them—and therefore shapes other aspects of our world—such as how nuclear weapons are thought about and deployed. (Cohn 228)

This perception of gender as a concept with wide range of meanings is caused first of all by the fact that gender marks a border between the notions of *us* and *them*. As an important mechanism of the processes associated with inclusion and exclusion, gender codes are used to establish the concept of *the other*, the ultimate rival or enemy who personifies distinctly different characteristics from those of oneself. Divergence from the appropriate gender behavior is believed to lead to social disorder and subsequent vulnerability of the community.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the dichotomy of "natural" gender performativity and "unnatural" sexuality was one of the main topics in American anticommunist narrative throughout the Cold War. Accusations against communism stressed its alleged attempt to distort human nature – the idea that was associated with hierarchic relations between the sexes. During the time when the battle with the USSR acquired almost "religious meaning" (Harle 2000), communism was understood as a type of gender deviation that challenged religious and ethical norms to the same extent as it contradicted Western political ideology. In her study of gender normativity during the Cold War, Cynthia Enloe emphasized that as well as being a competition between the two super-powers, the war represented a race to set the norms of masculinity and femininity (Enloe 18–19). John D'Emilio in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* explains: "A nation at the height of its power searched for answers about why the world was exploding with danger. Just as hidden traitors were undermining the nation's physical security, so too did sexual deviates deplete its moral resources" (D'Emilio 294). In this sense, Barbie doll, which illustrated American family virtues of the period, is no less an instrument of the warfare as, for example, intercontinental missiles. The image of a white middle-class family, consisting of a breadwinner husband, a housewife and two to four children, was understood as a representation of social success, conformity, sexual fulfilment and consumerism: the primary values of the post-World War II American society. Elaine Tyler May in *Homeward Bound* argues that in the dangerous atomic world, "[Americans] looked toward home as a way to bolster themselves against potential threats" (May 88).

In contrast, the images of Soviet femininity and masculinity were used to prove the accusation that the Soviet system caused men

to become infantile, because it deprived them of the basic foundation of masculinity—the right to own private property. The widespread use of sexual images and metaphors in the discourse of the Cold War highlights the process of feminization of the enemy, which is a common technique of military propaganda. If war is associated with power, so is masculinity. Since gender is traditionally used to denote domination, anticommunist rhetoric preyed on the images of emasculation. The Soviet Union became an abstract symbol of the imminent demise that would follow when Americans turn “soft.” Thus, American men were urged to strengthen their “moral fiber in order to preserve their freedom and their security”:

Many high-level government officials, along with individuals in positions of power and influence in fields ranging from industry to medicine and from science to psychology, believed wholeheartedly that there was a direct connection between communism and sexual depravity. [...] National strength depended upon the ability of strong, manly men to stand up against communist threats. (May 91)

Paradoxically, however, sexuality in the Soviet Union was simultaneously presented as insufficient in some cases and excessive in others. The backbone of the propaganda’s claim about the “unnatural” gender performativity was the idea that communism encouraged sexual indulgence and polygamous intimacy. Critics of the socialist political system often referred to the second chapter of “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” which includes a part about abolition of the family as a means to establish social equality (Marx and Engels 86). In the eyes of the public this meant that members of the communist party were more interested in sexual freedoms rather than in the political program itself (Sharp 102–103). Sex appeared as an uncontrollable force behind the spread of communist ideology, the vigor that caused social chaos when it was let loose. American mass media assured its audience that gender equality was merely a slogan of the Soviet propaganda: “Soviet women were freed from the slavery of their own husbands only to be trapped by the slavery of the state” (Brennan, qtd. in Riabov 22). Equality of the sexes was perceived as evidence of economic and cultural backwardness, and the US Information Agency asserted that only women in economically disadvantaged communities value career above motherhood (May 159).

Women’s liberation in the Soviet Union was presented as a shortcut to hard physical labor, which was declared the main reason of communist women’s deformed femininity. Richard M. Ketchum in his book *What is Communism?* (1955) writes: “According to the Soviet

understanding of ‘equality,’ women are obliged to do the hard work that is usually done by men in other countries. They work on railways, in mines, in logging, and in road construction” (171). Similar comment was made by the members of the 1955 American delegation to the Soviet Union, who during their tour of the Northern Caucasus were “both amused and disturbed by the large number of women engaged in heavy labor on farms and in factories” (*Christian Science Monitor*, qtd. in Brown 49). In their report, American farmers claimed that at least 60 percent of the farm laborers they had seen were women, “owing both to labor policies and the loss of working-age men during World War II” (Brown 50).

The theme of deformed femininity became central to representations of Soviet women in the American popular culture. In 1954, *Look* magazine published an article by Julie Whitney titled “Women – Russia’s Second-Class Citizens.” The author confirms that many Russian women receive a good education and become doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists, and party workers. However, Whitney continues, “a woman in Russia has a chance to be almost anything except a woman. Even today, in a relatively cosmopolitan Moscow, a good-looking, well-dressed girl wearing make-up is one of three things: a foreigner, an actress or a prostitute” (Whitney 116). This theme was a recurrent subject of ridicule in the American cinema of the period. Such films as *The Iron Petticoat* (1956), *Silk Stockings* (1957), *Jet Pilot* (1957), among others, portray Soviet women as desexualized adepts of communism. Through romantic connection with American men, they discover their femininity and take the first chance to flee to the West together with their lovers. Another example, a 1954 drawing by Bill Danch for *Independent Woman Magazine* depicts two communist women dressed in coats resembling military uniform, one complaining to the other: “Even if we are superwomen, I still wish we had fun like Americans” (illustrated in Belmonte 89).

The so-called “kitchen debate” between Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow on July 25, 1959, brought gender discourse to the highest level of official rhetoric. Remarkably, the discussion between the two leaders did not address missiles, bombs, or modes of government, but, instead, focused on the relative merits of color television and washing machines. Nixon insisted that the essence of American freedom was confirmed by abundant life in modern suburban family homes. Khrushchev replied to Nixon’s assertion with a famous phrase “In this country we do not have the capitalist attitude towards women” (qtd. in “kitchen debate tran-

script”). This episode became known in the history of the United States as an official proclamation of the ideology of domestic containment which took over the nation’s consciousness for over two decades. Within such political and ideological context, the 1959 Khrushchev’s visit to the United States was a particularly significant step to improve relations between the two countries and required meticulous means to prepare the public.

**NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV’S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES:  
“THE PREMIER TO TAKE HIS FAMILY ALONG”**

Khrushchev’s American tour had to become the first official visit of a Soviet leader to the United States, the center of the capitalist world. The meeting was equally necessary for both parties: the Soviet Union was striving for the earliest possible agreement on the status of West Berlin, while Eisenhower sought through negotiations with the Soviet side to raise the prestige of the Republican administration in the light of the upcoming 1960 presidential elections (Kuskova 182). At the beginning of 1959, the XXI “Extraordinary” Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union stated:

Improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union is of particular importance in the process of defusing international tensions. Expansion of trade, cultural ties, as well as personal contacts of statesmen and public figures can play an important role in improving mutual understanding and establishing friendly relations between the states. (*Verbatim record* 59)

Prior to this unprecedented event, the mass media was tasked to set favorable ideological context for the visit and educate the general public about the importance of collaboration between the two states. Donald R. Matthews, a political scientist and contemporary of the events, acknowledged that the US media in the 1950s and 1960s were “overcooperative” and “complaisant” (qtd. in Fink and Schudson 4), and there is little doubt that certain instructions had been forwarded to the journalists. Similar argument is expressed by Kathryn McGarr, who suggests that there was a reinforced sense of common purpose between the political administration and news reporters, the so-called “consensus” in “conducting the nation’s affairs during the ‘troubled times,’ as they saw them” (McGarr 79).

However, the tone of American and Soviet publications varied significantly. The main argument proclaimed by communist periodicals was that the future peace of the world depended on Khrushchev’s trip. For several months, media space of the *Pravda*, the central state-

controlled newspaper of the USSR, was overtaken by such headlines as “Put an End to the Cold War” (August 10), “The World Can Be Released From the Danger of a New War” (August 13), “Allow People to Take a Deep Breath” (August 30), “Melt the Ice of the Cold War” (September 3), “In the Interests of the People of the Whole World” (September 3) etc. On the other side of the Atlantic, US society seemed to be wary of the upcoming visit. In his memoir *My Life and The Times*, Turner Catledge remembers that as editor-in-chief of the *New York Times*, his editorial office was literally bombarded with both angry and positive responses to the upcoming event (Catledge 252). The American society was split into two camps: despite the obvious interest in the Soviet leader, some Americans did not want to see Khrushchev as their guest. For example, on September 6, 1959 *The New York Times* published an article “Anti-Soviet Posters Being Sought Here” reporting a protest against Khrushchev’s visit: “Keep your city clean—keep it from Khrushchev.” In the section “Letters to the Editor” on August 9, 1959, the newspaper published a collection “Comments on Khrushchev’s Visit,” where the following letter from Gerard T. Baxter appeared: “I am shocked by Eisenhower’s invitation to Khrushchev to visit this country. Khrushchev represents all that evil that is hateful and contrary to the basic concepts that gave birth to the United States as a nation” (8).

In the context of such criticism, Khrushchev took a decision to include his wife, Nina P. Khrushcheva, and their children into the official delegation. The need to establish contacts between the USSR and the West required emergence of the new characters in the information field, figures who could penetrate the iron curtain. Khrushcheva who was not only a member of the Soviet delegation, but had her own personal program as part of the official visit, was one of such figures called to establish positive image of the Soviets in the United States (Tsvetkova 30). This strategic idea was based on the understanding that American ideology of the era was built around domestic values, therefore the public’s attention towards the Premier’s family would direct the media narrative towards essential human qualities that transcend social and ideological systems.

This strategy was unusual for the Soviet foreign policy, as spouses of the heads of state in the USSR carried no official duties and received no public recognition until the late 1980s, when Raisa Gorbacheva, wife of the last General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, adopted traditions of Western countries and started implementing cultural, educational and charitable duties. Until that time, the Soviet public discourse did not acknowledge

the formal title of “the First Lady of Russian Land” (Petrova 138) and often deliberately excluded wives of communist leaders from the media narrative. For example, after their return from the United States in 1959, Nikita and Nina Khrushchev paid an official visit to Rostov region, however the photographs of Nina were absent from news reports and official archives of the event (Petrova 137).

The idea to take the entire Khrushchev family on the American trip was suggested by First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan (see Kuskova 183; Petrova 140; Gorlov 125 et al.). Already after the preliminary program of the visit was confirmed by both states, Mikoyan drew Khrushchev’s attention to the fact that American ideology was built around the idea of family and main familial values (Kuskova 183). International diplomatic etiquette required heads of states to be accompanied by spouses, therefore adherence to this protocol would create positive image of the Soviet Union in the eyes of American public. Nikita Khrushchev explains his decision in the memoir *Time. People. Power. Memories*:

Before that, I traveled to India, was in England, Finland, and at negotiations of four leaders in Geneva. The latter was actually a business trip, not a guest trip. We didn’t take our wives with us then. First of all, this was the legacy of Stalin’s times: Stalin did not travel anywhere and was very jealous of anyone who took a wife along. I think only once did Stalin order Mikoyan to take his wife with him when traveling to the USA. Secondly, in our country this was considered either a luxury or something smugly tasteless, but not a businesslike. Now the same question arose before my trip. I also thought about going alone, without accompanying spouse. But Mikoyan said: “Abroad, common people treat others better if guests come with their wives. And if a man is also followed by other family members, this favors him even more. Therefore, I would suggest that Khrushchev takes Nina Petrovna with him and also includes other members of his family in the delegation. This will be well regarded by the American people, and it is better for us.” I doubted whether I should do this. But members of the Presidium of the Central Committee supported Anastas Ivanovich and convinced me that this would really be good. I agreed. (Khrushchev 634)

The plan was able to achieve the expected results: news about Nina Khrushcheva’s arrival excited the public and took up significant part of informational buildup in the media. Notably, the appeal of the Premier’s wife resided not in her nationality or political beliefs, but in the universal down-to-earth femininity and essential domestic virtues she seemed to epitomize. As a result, references to her professional background were almost entirely omitted from the reports. Instead, the press highlighted her role as a faithful wife, loving mother and grandmother.

It was only decades later that academic and publicistic studies of the period started taking an interest in the personality of Nina Khrushcheva. Until recently, her name almost exclusively appeared in scholarly analyses dedicated to her husband’s biography. Nevertheless, Khrushcheva’s personal archives and official documents available at the State Archive of the Russian Federation, Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, and Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Petrova 138) make it possible to look at her role in the history of the Soviet Union independently from that of Nikita Khrushchev.

Nina Khrushcheva (*née* Kukharchuk) was born on April 14, 1900 in the village of Wasylów, which was then part of the Russian Empire, and now lies within the borders of contemporary Poland. Although coming from a poor peasant family, Nina received good education: upon recommendation from her school teacher, she enrolled in Lublin City Gymnasium and later with the support of archbishop of Chełm – in Mariinsky Women’s College. Notably, there is no information regarding schooling of Nina’s younger brother Ivan, thus it is possible that she was the only one in the family with formal education (Petrova 138). In early 1920s, Khrushcheva joined the Bolshevik party and soon was working as an agitator on the Polish front and as the head of women’s division of the Central Committee of Communist Party in Western Ukraine. In 1921 after completing eight-month courses at the Sverdlov Communist University in Moscow, she was assigned to teach political economy and history of revolution in Donbass, where Nina met Nikita Khrushchev. Even though their marriage was not officially registered until 1965, in her memoirs Nina Khrushchev writes that since 1924 they were “wed”<sup>1</sup> (qtd. in Petrova 139). Understandably, the information that Nikita and Nina Khrushchev were not legally married at the time of their visit to the US was not reported in the western press. Similarly, American journalists avoided drawing attention to the fact that it was Nikita’s third marriage and he was raising two children from his first wife (see Nelson 9).

Nina Khrushcheva continued active career until the beginning of the Great Patriotic War in 1941, when together with her children she moved from Moscow to Kiev and then to Samara due to the German invasion of the Soviet Union. She had occupied positions of the Director of Soviet Party school at the Moscow Electric Machinery

1 The practice of common-law marriage was wide-spread among high-ranking members of the communist party during the 1920s and reflected belief in the new socialist way of life. At the same time, it was caused by the transition from church marriage regulations to civil law, which was promoted by the “Decree on Separation of Church from State and School from Church” (1918).

Plant, and Secretary of the Soviet Council for Scientific, Engineering and Technical Communities. In her own words, these years were the most productive in her social and professional life. Young, active and intelligent, she was able to combine career with household chores, looking after her three children and two step-children. Sergei Khrushchev, third child born to Nikita and Nina in 1935, later recalled that although his father's authority was never questioned, the "real power in the family was exercised by Mama. The uncomplaining, smiling, stout, grandmotherly persona she exhibited during her American odyssey was authentic, but it belied her intelligence and determination" (Taubman, qtd. in Nelson 9).

To American reporters, Khrushcheva represented the classic morals of a true wife, qualities that amidst the 1950s cult of domesticity in the United States were understandable and relatable for the public. She was described as a "simple, friendly woman who worships her husband, respects his words as head of the family as well as the state, and loves his children" (*The Los Angeles Times*, 20 September 1959). In another publication she was said to have "all the aspects of a good woman, in the best connotations of that phrase" (*The Atlanta Constitution*, 16 September 1959). Journalists repeatedly noted Khrushcheva's "grandmotherly affection for youngsters [which] soon became one of her most notable characteristics" (*Newsweek*, 28 September 1959). *The Atlanta Constitution* even suggested that "the word [mother] could have been invented for her" (16 September 1959).

Portrayal of her appearance and simple dressing style made her appealing for the American working class. The articles pointed out her comfortable shoes, "pleasantly solid" physique, emphasized the fact that she did not use make-up and avoided fashionable accessories. Article contrasting the wardrobes of Mamie Eisenhower and Nina Khrushcheva at a formal reception at the White House appeared in *Atlanta Constitution* on 16 September and in *Life Magazine* on 28 September. On 20 September, a full front-page article "Mr. K Hurls Hot Retort at Poulson" in *The Los Angeles Times* pointed out that while Mme. K would never be confused with a high fashion model, "there is something about her, something honest and good." She was presented as polite and unpretentious, thus "evoked the admiration of countless stout, plainly-dressed American women, who perhaps identified themselves with her in the world's spotlight" (*Los Angeles Times*, 20 September 1959, pg.1).

These reports resonated with the baby-boom culture and transcended antagonisms of the Cold War. Focusing on the maternal and domestic, American press successfully obscured the contradic-

tions that Soviet ideology posed to gender normativity in the United States. As *Newsweek Magazine* from 28 September 1958 reported: "If Americans warmed up to anyone in the group, more than likely it would be the Soviet Premier's modest, plainly dressed, sweet-faced wife with her shy, beaming smile" (qtd. in Griswold 888).

Khrushcheva's media representations also achieved another important goal: drawing attention to her interest in everyday American culture, they trivialized the image of the Soviets, made it less fearsome and daunting. For example, on September 17, Edith Ashbury wrote for *The New York Times* that during her visit to Beltsville, Mrs. K exchanged recipes with her hostess, enjoyed fried chicken, ham, apple pie, and cheese during her lunch, and collected matchcovers for her grandchildren. In another article Ashbury tells a story of Nina Khrushcheva's shopping spree, sharing details about what the wife of the Premier bought and how she paid—the author mentions that Nina bought nylon stockings, took out the money from a special envelope, and paid with ten-dollar banknotes (*The New York Times*, 22 September).

In fact, Khrushcheva's public appeal was transmitted onto the image of her husband. Gwen Robyns in "The Woman Behind Khrushchev" (*The Look Magazine*, 1959) explained that Mme. Khrushcheva had "played a vital part in pushing the rambunctious son of a miner to his present eminence." Robyns pointed out that Khrushcheva persuaded her husband to pursue further education after the war and introduced him to good literature and the arts. The article also made a point that Khrushchev recognized and appreciated his wife's contribution to his success: the author recounted one occasion when Nikita raised a toast to Nina and cried out "May she live long! I owe it all to her" (Robyns 79).

#### IN PLACE OF CONCLUSION: DEPICTIONS OF SOVIET FEMININITY FOLLOWING THE 1959 STATE VISIT

The next few months after Khrushchev's American tour can be characterized as the most tranquil period of the Cold War. "Categorical statements, threats, and accusations disappeared from newspaper pages, [...] the skirmishing over Berlin continued, but without its former ardor and malice" (Kordon 169). One of the direct consequences of the negotiations in Washington was the Antarctic Treaty signed 1 December 1959 between the United States, the Soviet Union and ten other states that internationalized and demilitarized the Antarctic continent. Eisenhower's visit to Moscow was planned to occur in June 1960. However, the period of conciliation was short-lived

and is generally considered to end with the U-2 incident in early May 1960. The relations between the United States and the Soviet Union continued to deteriorate, including Paris summit in May 1960 when the meeting between the American, British, French and Soviet heads of state finished with Khrushchev's leaving the meeting after Eisenhower refused to apologize for the U-2 incident.

Despite the increasing strain in American-Soviet relations, the image of Nina Khrushcheva was presented to the West as a symbol of openness of the communist world. On various occasions, Khrushcheva seemed to be the last hope amidst the threats of the atomic age. When in September 1961 she hosted a ninety-minute meeting with a group of Western anti-nuclear activists, *The New York Times* quoted her statement about peace and armistice: "the Soviet Union was not building air-raid shelters because 'we are not getting ready for war'" (7 October 1961). On November 15, the same newspaper published a short note about Jacqueline Kennedy's and Nina Khrushcheva's joint appeal for world peace. Several months later Khrushcheva recorded an audio message in "accented but flowing" English which was addressed to American women. An article in *The New York Times* from February 19 describes her speech: "The Premier's wife expressed gratification over the 'peace movement' of American women. Her formula for world peace was this: 'Let us sink atom bombs along with the other weapons in the deepest part of the ocean and live without weapons as good neighbors.'"

Reports about Khrushcheva's campaigns fell on favorable background in the United States, where in the early 1960s society started questioning the ideology of domesticity. "The baby-boom children who grew up in suburban homes abandoned the containment ethos when they came of age. As young adults in the 1960s and 1970s, they challenged both the imperatives of the cold war and the domestic ideology that came with it" (May 1999). In 1963, the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan shed light on non-normative types of femininity and undermined stereotypical gender representations. This helped ignite interest of the American public in the image of a professionally trained Soviet woman who seemed to enjoy social recognition and authority. Consider, for example, attention of the media to Valentina Tereshkova, twenty-six-year-old female cosmonaut aboard *Vostok 6* spaceship in June 1963, the first woman in space. Achievements of Soviet female athletes similarly fascinated the press: in "The Rise of Soviet Athletics" Joseph A. Marchiony wrote that "communist Russia is severely challenging the US supremacy and is fast becoming the greatest nation of athletics in history. [...] It was the women who put Russia on the 'athletic map' in track and field" (17).

This perception of the Eastern Bloc as radically different from the West but nevertheless intriguing and appealing is considered to be a form of orientalism and is more specifically referred to as *Russianism* (Riabov 176). Scholars have argued that discursive practices of orientalism were actively used by propaganda during the second half of the twentieth century, which also included erotization of "exotic" Slavic women. The March 1964 edition of *Playboy* was dedicated to "the girls of Russia and the iron curtain countries." The editorial note stated that "today, any man who can afford to spend some \$1500 can be his own jet-propelled Marco Polo anywhere this side of the Urals" (46). Notably, in popular discourse Soviet women always found "awakening" through romantic relationship with a Westerner – as, for example, the heroine of the classic James Bond movie *From Russia With Love* (1963).

Paradoxically, construction of Khrushcheva's image in American mass media followed similar objectives in respect of presenting Soviet femininity as different, fascinating but not frightening. As illustrated by the examples above, her public persona was adjusted to fit the Western understanding of the role and responsibilities of the First Lady: the position that was absent from the Soviet public diplomacy of the time. Media representations of Nina Khrushcheva aimed to prove that the country she and her husband represented was not so hostile after all. She was the first high-rank communist woman who through deliberate attention to her role as a wife and a mother became a symbol of similarities rather than differences between the two ideologies.

In collective consciousness, stereotypes continuously replace each other as required by ideological and cultural diplomacy. Created and popularized through mass media and popular culture, they depend on true prototypes for credibility and vitality. During the time when the United States and the Soviet Union attempted to find common ground amidst antagonisms of the Cold War, Nina Khrushcheva became an important representation of what it meant to be a woman in the USSR. There is little doubt that her public image in the US was manipulated to fit the political and ideological agenda, as much as it was utilized by the Soviet Union for its own purposes. Nevertheless, media image of Khrushcheva presented a powerful message for American public that at the time was searching for the way to celebrate female power and independence.

*Abstract:* The gender discourse had an important role in the ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and proved to be an effective weapon of the Cold War. In American imagination, the image of a Soviet woman became an epitome of ‘the other’ which both personified the threat of communism and eased domestic anxieties about rigid gender roles in the post-war US. However, the Cold War was not a homogeneous process. The period from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s referred to as the Khrushchev Thaw, was characterized by attempts of peaceful coexistence between the two superpowers culminating in Khrushchev’s visit to the United States in September 1959. Nina P. Khrushcheva, the wife of the first secretary of the Communist Party, became the first high-rank communist woman to tour the United States with an official visit. The American press took this opportunity to humanize the image of a woman from the other side of the iron curtain and, consequently, defuse tensions on the international stage. Khrushcheva’s visit became a turning point in constructing the image of Soviet femininity, introducing a stereotype of different but not intimidating womanhood. Despite the fact that the fragile hopes for peace between the Western and Eastern Blocs were shattered soon after Khrushchev’s visit, the popular rhetoric of the Soviet femininity was transformed. The present article analyzes the shift in the Soviet gender codes presented in the American newspapers, and puts them into historical context to show how international policies can gain human face in the press.

*Keywords:* Nina Khrushcheva, Cold War, gender stereotypes, Soviet femininity, mass media, Nikita Khrushchev’s visit in 1959, Cold War history, American history, American culture

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