DINNER PARTY POLITICS

April 9 - July 21, 2017
Introduction

We have strong emotional connections to the things we eat, which are tied to memory, heritage, and tradition. Food also plays a part in constructing national identities and expressing societal values. It is a powerful medium that carries both personal and political meaning.

Recipes, food advertisements, and even still-edible food from the Eastern Bloc may not always seem appetizing, but they are undeniably compelling; these objects can establish a uniquely personal connection with the past, based upon our imagined experiences of eating or preparing the depicted dishes. In the collection of The Wende Museum, these types of objects provide a unique lens through which we can learn about daily life behind the Iron Curtain.

Including a survey of fine art, posters, menus, and films, this exhibition explores how ideological goals, societal expectations, and individual desires were expressed through the production and consumption of food in socialist countries during the Cold War.
Ideology

Due to socialist collectivization and planned economies across the Eastern Bloc, the state controlled production, marketing, and the availability of various consumables. Broad oversight was given to central government entities, which made food-related choices that affected millions of people. Oftentimes, these decisions were influenced by political ideology; thus, many socialist food policies demonstrate the values and priorities of those in power. This section explores how three of these initiatives—international solidarity, public health, and modernization—were mediated through food.

This metaphorical meat grinder references the millions of people who perished during Joseph Stalin’s political purges and agricultural collectivization campaigns in the 1930s. Innumerable figures and faces enter the top of the meat grinder, which produces an image of Stalin’s face composed of tiny skulls extruded from the machine.


The title of this work, written around the edge of the depicted plate, references an important principle in socialist countries that every individual must contribute to society through labor or service. The hammer and sickle formed by the broken shards of plate may reference the failures of the Soviet state in implementing this egalitarian model.


These two paintings are a part of the Wende Museum’s Ferris Collection of two hundred thirty-four poster designs created by Moscow-based artists. This collection was created in the late Cold War and looks upon Soviet history and communism with a critical lens.
Modernized Agriculture and the Experiment of Corn

One important goal, especially in the early Cold War, was to develop a more secure food supply for citizens of the Eastern Bloc. Modernized agriculture became an important element in solving this problem as newly developed farm equipment improved work efficiency in the fields, while scientific developments related to chemical fertilizers and pesticides increased crop yields.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev championed one of the most famous experiments in modernized Eastern Bloc agriculture. Inspired by the widespread success of corn as a staple crop throughout the US, Khrushchev advocated for its potential to improve his own citizens’ lives through better health and nutrition. He was so dedicated to this campaign that he earned himself the nickname Kukuruznik, or “Corn Man.”

Khrushchev formed an unlikely connection with hybrid seed developer Roswell Garst, who hosted the Soviet leader on his Iowa farm in 1959; he advised the Premier on planting methods, including specific types of fertilizer, to ensure the success of corn crops. Under Khrushchev’s leadership, corn was widely planted, but Garst’s recommendations were not systematically carried through, ultimately resulting in mass crop failures that contributed to the downfall of Kukuruznik.

Installation of Soviet posters from the 1950’s-1980’s that all reference technical achievements in food production
Leonid Golovanov, *Hydroponics – the way!*, 1964, Soviet Union


Republican House of Health Education of Latvian SSR, *Carefully Wash Fruits and Vegetables Before Eating*, 1950’s-1960’s, Soviet Union
**Soviet Leader Nesting Dolls**, n.d., Russia
Notice that Khrushchev is wearing an ear of corn for a necktie.

**György Kádár, Night on the Fields**, 1950s, Hungary

**Tractorul Brasov Plant, Tractor Production Commemorative**, n.d., Romania
Health and Anti-Alcohol Campaigns

Health and education campaigns were omnipresent in the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War period, as healthy and productive citizens were considered crucial to a thriving society. These campaigns alternately focused on what to eat, with an emphasis on nutrition and healthy food, and what to avoid, with special attention to alcohol abuse and its disturbing effects on personal health, work productivity, and family life.
Sándor Lengyel, *Do Not Give Children Alcohol*, n.d., Hungary

Alexander Lozenko, *Drunkenness – Suicide*, 1988, Soviet Union

Menus & Internationalism

During the Cold War, it was important for socialist countries to establish a coherent, unified identity that all Eastern Bloc citizens could relate to and rally behind. To promote this international identity, friendship among socialist countries was encouraged by the state. One result of this policy was a new food culture, in which regional dishes became widely distributed and mass-produced; this shared palate helped establish a tasty and tangible connection between individuals thousands of miles apart. International recipes and restaurants not only allowed for a touch of exoticism in an otherwise relatively bleak food environment, but also stressed the importance of solidarity among socialist countries worldwide.
VEB Colditzer Porzellanwerk, Recipe Plates, n.d., East Germany
Main Gallery Film Clips

The film clips in the Ideology section are all examples of official news clips, commercials, or educational film related to food in the Eastern Bloc. Most of the East German clips in this reel are from The Wende Museum’s permanent collection; we have also included examples from other archives specializing in former Eastern Bloc film.

Newsreel excerpt on “the hour of free milk,” 1960s, Latvia

Fernsehen der DDR, *Picture Your Career: Butcher*, 1977, East Germany

Deutsches Zentralinstitut für Lehrmittel, *Labor Education in Kindergarten*, 1961, Czechoslovakia/East Germany

Eugene Tilicheev, advertisement for processed cheese, 1970s, Soviet Union
Gender

Despite the belief that gender divisions were not supposed to exist within socialist societies, such distinctions persisted throughout the Cold War period. Women were encouraged and expected to participate in the workforce outside the home, yet over eighty percent of domestic labor such as cooking, housekeeping, and childcare still fell on their shoulders.

Governments acknowledged this “double burden,” yet solutions proposed to alleviate women’s household obligations merely addressed symptoms of the problem, such as not having enough time, with the development of new products like pre-prepared food and specialty cooking appliances. Despite advances to liberate individuals from domestic responsibilities, official and popular culture continued to reinforce expectations for women to pursue traditional interests of maintaining the home.

This work depicts a typical Soviet woman as a windmill, with each arm representing a different responsibility and how much time is allotted for this task each day. She spends nine hours working, three hours cooking, one and a half hour shopping, one hour cleaning, and one hour doing laundry. At the end of the day, she is allowed seventeen minutes to spend with her children. This painting is a part of the Ferris Collection of Soviet poster designs. *The Fresh Winds of Change?* is displayed with a selection of East German and Soviet advertisements and magazine articles that illustrate the various responsibilities and expectations for the Eastern Bloc women.
Gyula Macskassy, *It's Worth More Than Its Price*, n.d., Hungary (right) is exhibited with a selection of East German and Romanian images advertising “time-saving” products from kitchen tools to pre-made food products.
Depictions of women in Eastern Bloc publications appear very different based on the type of labor they are performing. While women working outside the home are shown as skilled laborers with technical mastery, women doing household tasks such as cooking or cleaning are shown as more one-dimensional figures, simply happy doing housework.
While many think of socialist countries as strictly authoritarian regimes with a basic lack of freedom, a slightly more nuanced picture emerges when looking at how individuals and families navigated the socialist system. During the Cold War, many citizens refrained from expressing their opinions in public for fear of being overheard and reported on by secret police or informants. In response, people carved out private spaces for open conversations amongst trusted friends, often revolving around food. Seemingly innocuous activities such as sharing an afternoon coffee or growing your own vegetables and participating in a gardening club could become politically significant, as they enabled private and sometimes critical exchanges.

In 1988, the artist collective Autoperforationsartisten conducted an art happening in which they locked themselves in a Leipzig gallery for ten days. From six to eight o’clock each evening, visitors could come into the galleries and exchange food for art that was being produced. This happening was inspired by West German artist Joseph Beuys’s concept of a “social sculpture,” which imagines society as a collective art piece made by everyone.
Private Kitchens

Across the Eastern Bloc, kitchens served as spaces where friends and families could gather to share ideas, exchange books and music, and discuss politics outside of government surveillance. An important activity that often took place in private kitchens and domestic spaces in East Germany was the Kaffeeklatsch or Kaffee und Kuchen, a gathering similar to British teatime, when family or friends would get together to have a cup, share a bite, and catch up with one another. Good coffee was considered an important part of this ritual.

CLARA MOSCH was an art collective active from 1977 to 1982 that stressed autonomy in their art and practice. While the five members all belonged to the Künstlerverband, the official artists’ union in East Germany, CLARA MOSCH sought to create environments where individuals could be free to express themselves. This poster, depicting the collective at Kaffeeklatsch, may reference the pursuit of private spaces and artistic freedom.
Acquiring Coffee in East Germany

Coffee was much in demand in the Eastern Bloc, but there were limited supplies of this hot commodity. Coffee could only be paid for and imported with internationally stable, “hard currency.” East German marks and Soviet rubles were considered “soft currency,” as they were not widely accepted or traded outside of their countries of origin. Due to chronic shortages of hard currency, limited amounts of coffee could be imported to Eastern Bloc countries.

In East Germany, real coffee, or *Bohnenkaffee*, was generally sold as a luxury item at specialty stores, some of which only accepted foreign hard currencies. People might also receive limited amounts of high-quality coffee in gift packages from family in the West. *Ersatz* (substitute) coffee products, which contained ingredients like chicory, dried peas, and beets, were more commonly available. People stretched limited supplies by creating mixed drinks with coffee, making beverages like “Kaffee mit Pfiff,” a recipe calling for cold whole milk, two types of sugar, cocoa, and one teaspoon of ground coffee. Coffee cocktails, containing vodka or brandy, were also popular and certainly enlivened the *Kaffeeklatsch*.
Advertisement for Venag Coffee Substitute, 1950s, East Germany

"An excited conversation...and a cup of Mona" advertisement for Mona brand coffee, 1955, East Germany

East German toy espresso maker displayed with other coffee-related items
East German Home Movies

In the Agency section, clips from The Wende Museum’s Hoffman Collection of home movies were presented as a counterpoint to the official and staged depictions of food production and consumption shown in the Ideology section. Created between 1939 and 1969, with a majority of the collection dating from 1955 to 1964, these films capture holiday and birthday feasts, food consumed on family vacations, and many other peeks into daily life. All of these clips demonstrate the social importance of food and dining together for families in East Germany.

Visit The Wende Museum’s online catalog to see more films from The Hoffman Collection.
Gardening and Country Getaways

Throughout the Eastern Bloc, allotment garden plots and dachas (summer cottages) offered a cherished retreat from the pressures of daily life, as well as providing a way to supplement diets through food cultivation and gathering, such as mushroom foraging.


Detail of East German children’s game, *We’re Collecting Mushrooms*
What is an Allotment Garden?

Allotment gardens are common throughout Europe and have a history dating to the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. Factory owners would provide individual garden plots to families so they could have fresh produce to supplement their diets. These separate plots are part of a larger allotment garden community, which sets guidelines and rules for members. Allotment gardens are still popular in many countries and are similar to community gardens in the US.

Allotment gardens existed in many Eastern Bloc countries, and oftentimes people built small structures on their plots for weekend getaways. During the early Cold War in East Germany, state officials labeled these sites of individual cultivation and production as petit bourgeois. In 1959, the state-run organization Verband der Kleingärtner, Siedler und Kleintierzüchter (Association of Small Gardeners, Planters, and Small Animal Breeders) was established to exert official control over these private gardeners. Allotment gardeners served an important function in providing their communities fresh produce, which was not always readily available in urban stores and supermarkets.
As part of an effort to address and remedy various social issues, Soviet officials developed a campaign in the late 1980s that encouraged people to be more open and straightforward about problems in society. This poster depicts a barren landscape partially obscured by a propped-up image of a bountiful harvest, calling on individuals to be more realistic about shortcomings in the socialist system.

While government organizations ensured that staple foods like bread were always available, development of consumer goods was not a high priority for socialist countries in the early Cold War. Money was often spent on developing other sectors of industry. As a result, the selection and variety of food products was often limited. This work references consumer shortages by depicting an upside-down box of “Orbit” brand cheese. “Dense in the Cosmos, Empty on the Table” is written along the right edge, referencing one of the government’s biggest funding priorities, the space race. This painting is part of the Ferris Collection of Soviet poster designs.

Victor Dorokov, *Dense in the Cosmos, Empty on the Table!*, 1989, Soviet Union

Nikolai Chervotkin, *Down with Window Dressing!*, 1989, Soviet Union
Dinner Party Politics was organized by Curatorial Associate Amanda Roth with support from Chief Curator Joes Segal, A/V Archivist Kate Dollenmayer, and interns Maddie Adams, Mahsa Farhadikia, and Silvia van Bergeijk.

Special thanks to Lali Shesternina Collection for the generous loan of Soviet menus, to Vera Kopecky for object and installation images, and to Jessica Hoffmann for thoughtful text edits. The Dinner Party Politics catalog was designed by Lindsey Johnson.

Learn more about the objects in this exhibition by visiting our online catalog at <http://www.wendemuseum.org/collections/main.php?module=objects>.

The Wende Museum approaches provision of access with a commitment to ethical, well-intentioned practice. If you are concerned that you have found material in this catalog to which you hold the rights and for which you have not given permission, please contact us at catalog@wendemuseum.org. Upon request, we will remove material from public view while we address rights concerns.

The Wende Museum, 5741 Buckingham Parkway, Suite E, Culver City, CA. 90230
www.wendemuseum.org
phone: 310-216-1600
© 2017