

Work and Play behind the Iron Curtain

'It is not bad if in improving the theory of Marxism one throws in also a piece of bacon and a piece of butter.' Nikita Khrushchev Concepts of consumption and commerce may seem diametrically opposed to the ideals of the Soviet Union, and yet they are inextricably linked with life behind the Iron Curtain. Consumer culture looms large in the history of the socialist state: from Lenin's support of free trade during the New Economic Policy, to the opening of GUM in the 1950s – then one of the largest department stores in the world –, to the challenges of privatisation in a post-Soviet economy.

The Moscow-based AMO-ZIL factory has experienced and survived all these vagaries of the twentieth century, even being named after Stalin for two and a half decades. One of the most prestigious industrial enterprises in the Soviet Union, it was mainly devoted to the production of motor vehicles, manufacturing trucks and military vehicles alongside exclusive limousines favoured by party officials. For the masses, the factory began producing the ZIL refrigerator in 1950, which became a status symbol itself, the Rolls Royce of domestic appliances with its curvilinear shapes inspired by American models. ZIL's 1950 expansion from army vehicles to refrigerators was emblematic of the times. From the late 1950s, millions of so-called *khrushchevkas*, or standardised apartment blocks with rooms of miserly propor-





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A group of workers at ZIL (then known as AMO), 1926

Workshop at ZIL (then known as AMO), 1925

ZIL workers adding the finishing touches to a limousine, 1940s

All courtesy GRAD and ZIL

tions, sprang up across the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev, who was rising to power after Stalin's death, denigrated the architectural excesses of the earlier regime during a party address in 1954, condemning the mammoth buildings with superfluous decorations. He launched an intensive housing drive using modern prefabricated elements and simple lines. By 1964, the newly founded design journal *Tekhnicheskaia estetika* [*Technical Aesthetics*] could boast that 'the USSR today builds more apartments every year than the USA, England, France, FRG, Sweden, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland altogether'. What they failed to mention was that the occupants of those apartments had 40% less living space than their Western counterparts.

Cold War tensions spilled into the domestic sphere. In 1959 the American National Exhibition arrived in Moscow, aiming to show off shiny consumer goods and put pressure on the Soviet government to devote less resources to heavy industry and the military. The event became notorious thanks to the so-called 'Kitchen Debate', an impromptu war of words between Richard Nixon, then the US Vice President, and Khrushchev. The implication was clear: although the Soviets had launched the Sputnik two years earlier, more down-to-earth matters such as poor living conditions and a lack of consumer goods were hindering progress. Visitors to the American National Exhibition were rumoured to jostle for the privilege of picking up used Pepsi cups and photographs show stacks of canned foods protected inside glass display cases. Determined not to be outdone, Khrushchev focused his emerging economic plan on 'catching up and overtaking' capitalism, offering every family a modern flat of its own, fitted with every convenience.

The resulting boom in Soviet design had an effervescence not seen since the earlier Constructivist period, despite inauspicious circumstances. There was not even a Russian term for 'design', so the emerging discipline was called 'technical aesthetics' and institutionalised in 1962 in the form of the All-Union Institute of Technical Aesthetics (VNIITE). As *Technical Aesthetics* - the VNIITE journal – shows, its members were highly aware of international design trends. In fact, all the USSR's budding design professionals had to be in order to 'catch up with capitalism' and overcome the gaping creative hole left by Stalin's regime. Many products bore striking similarities to Western items: the Star-54 radio was reputedly based on the French Excelsior-52 brought back by a Soviet diplomat; the Vyatka scooter and the Italian Vespa seemed to have been separated at birth; while the Saturnas vacuum cleaner was not dissimilar in shape or name to Hoover's Constellation model.

The new consumer goods jostled for recognition with the heavy industries, traditionally the pride and joy of the Soviet state. Factories with martial monikers added incongruous new items to their roll-call of products, such as one gun-powder plant which began producing Nevalyashka roly-poly dolls in 1959. ZIL lavished as much care on their refrigerator as they did on their limousines, and the product swiftly entered popular culture, even appearing in satirical cartoons. Domestic appliances were seen as a by-product of the Space Race: new technologies coming to the aid of housewives, many of whom had access to electricity and plumbing for the first time in their new flats. An electric samovar, a vibrantly coloured portable radio or a sewing machine with an electromechanical drive were all symbols of a new and brighter future. Even perfume, a bourgeois luxury once upon a time, was now available to every woman thanks to new synthetic ingredients. Encapsulating this new-found optimism, the poster for a 1959 documentary on urban reform entitled *It's Time for a Grand Housewarming!* shows a modern Soviet housewife throwing open







AMO-ZIL Today, 2014 Courtesy GRAD

the windows of her new flat to gaze at neighbouring new builds rising up. In reality, building so much so quickly meant that the flats were cramped and of poor quality. Families moving in had to discard many of their old belongings for lack of space, and the new much-trumpeted consumer goods were hard to come by, often requiring a special trip to Moscow. The *avoska* string bag still remained a fixture in the pockets of ordinary Soviet citizens, just in case they came across some basic yet scarce commodity, in contrast to the well-appointed ZIL refrigerators of party members. So-called 'Bones' recordings, bootleg copies of vinyl records featuring banned Russian and Western music made using illegally obtained medical X-ray sheets, hint at the still regimented quality of daily life during Khrushchev's Thaw.

Nonetheless many of the quirky, colourful and often charming designs that emerged during the last four decades of the Soviet regime survived to become iconic markers of everyday life. Some, like the Alenka chocolate packaging, are still thriving. Others were not so lucky. ZIL, one of the first large enterprises to be privatised after the collapse of the Soviet Union, currently faces an uncertain future. When Boris Yeltsin replaced the ZIL limousine with a Mercedes as his official car, he signalled the end of an era: from now on globalised consumption would be the name of the game.

Alexandra Chiriac

AMO-ZIL: The Rise and Fall of a Russian Factory

A Constructivist façade on one of Moscow's highways hides five square kilometres of industrial land in close proximity to the city centre. Embracing within its manufacturing portfolio such opposite extremes as domestic fridges for Soviet citizens and luxurious limousines for the government elite, ZIL – an acronym for 'Likhachev's Factory' – is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Soviet era, associated with its powerful rise and dramatic collapse.

The oldest Russian car factory, it was founded a year before the Revolution in 1916 as the Automobile Society of Moscow (AMO) by the wealthy Ryabushinsky family of industrialists, in order to overcome the country's desperate need for motor-vehicles during World War I. Nationalised in 1918 the factory struggled to survive due to a lack of funding, proper technical supplies, competent workers and effective management and was soon functioning as a vast repairs workshop for foreign tractors and motorcycles. The first truck assembled at AMO was a close copy of the Fiat F-15 but its appearance on the streets of Moscow on 1 November 1924 resulted in exuberant reviews in the Soviet press and created such a sensation that the date was proclaimed the official birthday of the Soviet automobile industry. By 1926 AMO had managed to increase production by only 366 trucks, an insignificant amount compared to the four million automobiles manufactured that year in the United States, sixty-five thousand in Italy and five thousand in Austria.

After a stream of ineffective top managers, Ivan Likhachev took charge in 1926 and remained the factory's director until his death in 1956. Recognising the vital need for renovating and modernising the factory, Likhachev sent a group of Soviet engineers and administrators on tour to Europe and the USA to gain new experience and acquire new technology. At home, Likhachev oversaw a complete reconstruction of the factory which involved quadrupling the size of its grounds, hiring thousands







AMO-ZIL Today, 2014 Courtesy GRAD

of construction workers from other projects, modifying the existing workshops, issuing a daily newspaper called Amovetz [The AMO Worker], and introducing strict disciplinary measures.

With the introduction of brand new technologies from the USA, as well as the start of the first Five-Year Plan with its focus on industrialisation, collectivisation and social competition, AMO was reborn. Combining the finest technological and aesthetic elements of leading car producers such as Fiat, Ford and Packard, the factory created its first passenger car in 1934. By the mid-1930s production of limousines had reached eight thousand a year, while tractor and truck manufacture exceeded an annual figure of 100,000. Such impressive results needed recognition and AMO was re-titled ZIS, short for Zavod imeni Stalina [The Factory Named After Stalin]. The Soviet leader was said to be personally involved in the design of elite cars made for Politburo members, and as a further seal of approval he even sent his son Vasilii to work at the factory as assistant engineer.

During the Second World War, with the majority of workers at the front line, the factory continued to supply military vehicles but also temporarily entered weapons production, which was carried out by women and children. In the decade that followed Likhachev died and the factory became ZIL - Zavod imeni Likhacheva - in his honour, coinciding with Khrushchev's denunciation of the Stalin cult. Undergoing another boost of modernisation, the factory became more widely recognized for the quality than for the quantity of its production. ZIL's continued proximity to power meant profitable contracts in a country where the state was the main customer. In the 1950s ZIL widened its range of services by producing bicycles, as well as the first Soviet refrigerators, and broadened its geographical horizons by establishing strong business links with communist China where hundreds of ZIL engineers were sent to assist with the implementation of the first Chinese car factory, now known as The First Automotive Works. Thousands of Chinese workers were welcomed at ZIL to undergo initial training, one of which was 30-year old Jiang Zemin, future President of the People's Republic of China.

Continuing its internal and external expansion, ZIL had seventeen affiliate branches successfully functioning all over the country by the mid-1970s, while its diverse product portfolio included cars, trucks, buses, limousines and even a six-wheel amphibious vehicle called 'the Bluebird', used for the recovery of Soyuz space capsules. As a state enterprise representing the Soviet Union in miniature, ZIL looked relatively well after its 200,000 employees, many of whom stayed with the factory generations after generation. They were provided with housing, schools, nurseries, hospitals and even annual holiday packages to Sochi and Crimea.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, AMO-ZIL (renamed yet again), lost its preferential treatment not just from the new Russian leaders who favoured travel by Mercedes, but also from ordinary citizens who proudly turned to Bosch and Electrolux to furnish their new Italian kitchens. Like many other industrial giants of the Soviet age, the company could not survive without state support in the absence of public demand. Where industrial dreams failed, commercial dreams are now being realised, with a shiny new ice palace emerging where a ZIL water-tower – designed by Constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov in the 1930s – once stood.

Elena Sudakova

Nevalyashka Roly-Poly Doll Produced from 1950s to 1970s



'Detskii' (Children's) Plasticine



'Tula' Sewing Machine with Electromechanic Drive Produced from 1950s to 1980s



Christian Dior in Moscow

Play

The colourful packaging of this plasticine kit belies the weighty significance of toy design in the Soviet Union. A scientific research institute focusing solely on toys was established as early as 1946 in Sergiev-Posad, striving to standardise country-wide production, create functional educational items and utilise cutting-edge technologies.

Toys could be seriously complex, such as intricate electronics kits, teaching boys to design and construct electric circuits. State rhetoric filtered down to the young generation through play, so an interest in technological advances was nurtured from a young age. Girls received miniature domestic appliances, such as fridges, stoves and washing machines, biding their time until they could become good Soviet wives and furnish their own modern apartments.

One toy however had more traditional roots. Generations of Soviet toddlers were entertained by some version of the Nevalyashka roly-poly doll, the Matrioshka's less glamorous cousin. Wooden versions were popular in the nineteenth century, representing rubicund merchants and clowns. The first Nevalyashkas were probably inspired by Japanese Daruma dolls which function as good luck charms and represent Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism. The principle is always the same: a weight placed low inside the hollow body of the toy ensures it always bounces back to a vertical position. Coupled with a colourful appearance and a tinkling sound, the Nevalyashka is a fun and engaging toy, still popular to this day. It assumed its shiny new plastic incarnation in the late 1950s at the Sergiev-Posad toy institute and was rolled out to factories across the Soviet Union. The mass drive for consumer goods led to strange synergies, with one gun-powder plant adding the new toys to its production line in 1959. It still manufactures them today and the range extends to 35 different models.

Fashion

Photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White once remarked, 'The factory girl in Moscow is just as eager to adorn herself and to enhance her attractiveness as is the lady of Park Avenue.' In the 1950s this became easier.

A bourgeois luxury once upon a time, perfume was rehabilitated with the rise of synthetic ingredients thanks to the the development of the Soviet chemical industry during Khrushchev's Seven-Year Plan. No longer an extravagance, it was now available to everyone, from factory girls to husbands looking for a handy gift on International Women's Day. The New Dawn factory produced a wide range of goods, some of which you can see in the exhibition: the 'Stone Flower' flagrance, with a decadent Faberge inspired box; 'The Tale of Tsar Sultan' perfume, with a satin-lined box and a kokoshnik-shaped bottle stopper; as well as the popular 'Red Moscow' range which included face powder and soap. The latter was touted as being superior to capitalist products and highly-sought after by Western tourists. Ironically it had been created in the 1920s by the factory's French perfumer Auguste Michel, who adapted it from a pre-Revolutionary fragrance entitled 'The Empress's Favourite Bouquet'. The New Dawn factory and its 'Red Moscow' range are still going strong today.



'Kamennii Tsvetok' (Stone Flower) Perfume Box and Bottle Produced 1950s



Poster for the Film 'It's Time for a Grand Housewarming' Designed by M. Lukyanov. 1959 Courtesy Moscow Design Museum



'Avoska' String Bag Produced 1980s

Those who could not afford a whole bottle of perfume, could use the slot machine which would squirt you with fragrance for 10 kopeks. It could be found in GUM, Moscow's grand department store that re-opened in 1953, having been closed by Stalin 25 years earlier. Located in the Red Square and facing Lenin's mausoleum, GUM was better supplied than other shops, functioning as a showcase for Western visitors and party officials. Ordinary citizens were more likely to gaze in its glamorous windows, as a 1961 Sunday Times feature on Russia showed. They had already been treated to a display of alluring fashions in 1959, when Christian Dior presented its latest collections in Moscow, at the invitation of the Soviet government. Twelve fashion models stayed in the Soviet capital for a week, posing for pictures with bewildered babushkas and presenting two or three catwalk shows every day. Most women however did not have access to a wide variety of fashions and home-made outfits were the norm, while a good seamstress was worth her weight in gold. A sewing machine was an equally important find and the 'Tula' model, seen here, was one of the first to boast an electromechanical drive. Produced from 1958, it was influenced by similar German models.

It's time for a grand housewarming

This brightly coloured poster promotes a 1959 documentary on urban reform in the Soviet Union. Wearing a lemon coloured cinched-in dress, a modern Soviet housewife flings open the windows of her new home. Outside, cranes stand ready to haul concrete panels into place, adding the finishing touches to a new apartment building in cheery communist red. You can watch clips of the film projected in the gallery. It depicts the mass housing drive launched by Nikita Khrushchev with the goal of giving every Soviet family its own apartment. This in turn led to a new interest in domestic goods and factories began branching out in new directions.

This gleaming curvaceous beauty is the 100,000th refrigerator produced by the ZIL factory. Having started out as a truck and car manufacturer, ZIL joined the consumer goods drive of the 1950s by adding a domestic appliance to its product portfolio. The result soon gained mythical status and was dubbed 'the Rolls Royce' of refrigerators, not least thanks to its car door chrome handle. It attracted the greatest number of visitors at exhibitions of domestic appliances and even featured in satirical cartoons, having become a recognisable social marker. The ZIL refrigerator was most likely to be found in the homes of high-ranking party members. Ordinary citizens made do with less prestigious brands, or even without. Even in 1960, only about 4% of the population owned a refrigerator or a washing machine. The climate helped, and perishables would often be stored on balconies, or hanging out of kitchen windows in string bags.

These ubiquitous items, called avoskas, became emblematic of the Soviet consumer experience. Derived from the Russian word 'avos', which translates roughly as 'perhaps', the avoska was literally a 'just in case' bag. As desirable goods were only sporadically available and plastic were bags even rarer, the savvy shopper had to be prepared for any opportunity. Designed to be carried in handbags or pockets, the avoska became an essential item for the Soviet housewife, who could thus join any queue she encountered. As one historian has observed, 'thoughts of shopping intruded into every corner of a Soviet woman's existence, so all-consuming was the planning, ingenuity, and scheming involved in procuring basic goods and services'.

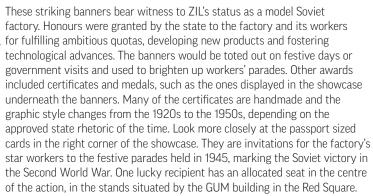
ZIL



Banners for outstanding achievements awarded to ZIL and its prize-winning employees by the Soviet state Late 1950s - 1960s Courtesy AMO-ZIL



ZIS-110 Limousine Produced from 1945 to 1958 Courtesy AMO-ZIL



Work at the factory did not stop during the Second World War, despite a period of evacuation. The war effort was supported by the production of military vehicles and machines, while designers were hard at work on the new ZIS-110 limousine model. When the luxury car made its debut during victory parades in 1945, it was billed as a sign of Stalin's confidence that the Soviet Union would prevail against Germany and life would return to normal. You can see the ZIS-110 here, sleek, shiny and black. All the models on display in the exhibition were in fact made in China, as a thank you gift to ZIL after Soviet engineers helped develop the first Chinese car factory in the 1960s.

ZIL was privileged in its close relationship with the state, and a its leaders would have enjoyed the ultimate status symbol of the Soviet bureaucrat: a dial-less telephone, such as the black model you can see on display. Such a phone would be programmed to call one number only, a convenient device as the number did not have to be dialled or remembered. It was enough just to pick up the receiver. A dial-less telephone meant a direct line to a high-placed government official, or even to the Kremlin. ZIL's director most certainly would have had one, thus being at the constant behest of Stalin and later Khrushchev.

Music on bones

These unusual records produced on recycled X-ray scans were part of an illegal practice by Soviet dissidents, began in the late 1940s. It was often the only opportunity to enjoy Western music such as jazz and foxtrot, and hits by the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley or The Beatles. If you look closer you will notice the barely visible grooves on the surface. These were made by pressing an original master recording against a heated and exposed X-ray film. 'Music on bones' as it was known was literally made on recycled X-rays of spinal cords, chest cavities and limbs taken from hospital bins and archives. As the grooves produced by this process were quite shallow, the records could only be played a small number of times, which enhanced their illicit quality.

The first laboratory to produce the homemade X-ray vinyls launched in St. Petersburg in 1946, calling itself 'Zolotaya Sobaka', the Golden Dog. It was not so much the sound quality of the X-ray records, but the zest and drama of producing and distributing underground records that was so appealing to those involved. The popularity of the records amongst progressive intellectuals



Bootleg audio recordings cut onto used X-Ray Plates c. 1957-1965 Courtesy 'X-Ray Audio' Project/ Stephen Coates/ Paul Heartfield/ Antique Beat Courtesy AMO-ZIL

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'Alenka' Chocolate Wrappers



Caviar Tin



Fizzy Water and Syrup Vending Machine Produced from 1960s Courtesy Moscow Design Museum

had put the contraband production under the scrupulous attention of the pro-KGB 'Music Patrol', which came to view the X-ray record production as an anti-Soviet activity punishable by 3-7 years of prison. The transition from the authoritarian Stalin period to the thaw with its appearance of the tape recorder saw a decline in underground records production after 1961.

Packaging

Two products at opposing ends of the consumer spectrum, the ubiquitous Alenka chocolate bar and the Beluga caviar both produced iconic packaging designs during the Soviet era. The Soviet produced 'Russian Caviar' came in tins colour coded according to the value of their contents. Beluga caviar, prized for its large grain, was the most expensive variety and came in a vivid blue, which you can see here. The less expensive Osetra and Sevruga, the most widely available, came in yellow and red tins respectively. This colour system is still used today, both in Russia and throughout the world.

The Alenka chocolate wrapper is one of the most iconic Soviet packaging designs, remaining a popular brand after more than 50 years. Urban legends circulated about the way the chocolate got its name, some claiming it was inspired by the offspring of cosmonauts Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova, both of whom had daughters called Lena. In reality, photographer Alexander Gerinas took a striking image of his eight month old daughter Lena in 1960. The portrait of the little girl, with her cherubic face framed by a colourful headscarf was widely circulated in Soviet magazines. Four years later, in 1964, a painted version of the photo was adopted for the Alenka chocolate wrapper by Moscow's Red October factory. The image proved to be incredibly popular amongst the Soviet public, even inspiring short poems which began to be included on the back of the wrappers. Although images of other children have featured on Alenka bars over the years, the original painting of Lena remains the most popular design and continues to be produced today.

Soda dispenser

A Soviet take on beverage vending machines, these ubiquitous dispensers offered only two choices: fizzy water or fizzy water flavoured with syrup of a dubious provenance. One kopek would get you the first, while the second option cost three kopeks, but it was much more satisfying to trick the machine into dispensing free soda. Children excelled at this, tying coins to fishing lines or kicking it in just the right spot. Mother however viewed it as an unhygienic scourge. The machine came with another Soviet invention, the bevelled 12-sided glass. Each user was supposed to rinse out the glass by pressing it down onto the little fountain found inside the dispenser, making it perfectly safe for the next person to drink from, in theory. A popular fixture in public places of both work and leisure, a similar vending machine can also be seen in one of the current photographs of the AMO-ZIL factory, languishing forgotten in a deserted workshop.

Cosmic dreams

The Space Race dominated the early period of the Cold War, with the Soviets launching the Sputnik in 1957, the first satellite to orbit the earth. But such lofty advances did not help the ordinary citizens, as Nixon pointed out to Khrushchev



'Saturnas' (Saturn) Vacuum Cleaner





'Chaika' (Seagull) Vacuum Cleaner



'Tekhnicheskaia Estetika' (Technical Aesthetics) Magazine Printed from 1968 to 1989

during his visit to Moscow two years later. The battle between the two nations moved quite literally into the kitchen, as the two political leaders spared near a bevy of shiny capitalist appliances at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. Their exchange, in July 1959, became known as 'The Kitchen Debate'.

Soviet women were soon being promised their own share of the space age, with cutting-edge domestic goods that would improve their quality of life. Designs reflected this new age of cosmic exploration. One vacuum cleaner was called 'The Seagull' and resembled a speeding rocket. Another model was shaped like the planet Saturn, even down to the ring surrounding it. Hardwearing and hardworking, these vacuums didn't just suck air in, they could also expel it, which made them popular tools for whitewashing ceilings and walls. Despite all these qualities, they were viewed with suspicion in some quarters. Mothers in law did not take kindly to these new-fangled machines, viewing them as a helping hand for work-shy housewives. Rival designers criticised the arrow-shaped decorations on the Seagull's body, claiming that eight tonnes of metal a year were wasted on a superfluous element. Despite the naysayers the vacuum cleaners soon became objects of desire, which often had to be procured during a special trip to the capital and would then remain in the family for years.

Other space inspired items also flourished, especially in the realm of packaging design. A blue and red tin box made to commemorate luri Gagarin's first flight into space on the Vostok shuttle could become a keepsake. The Sputnik appeared on the box of a desktop pencil organiser incongruously entitled 'Orbit' and coupled with the hammer and sickle emblem. Even a traditional object like a samovar could undergo a space age makeover, with a subtle nod to the Sputnik's globular shape and electric power.

VNIITE

These magazines were published by the All-Union Institute for Technical Aesthetics, known as VNIITE for short. Created in 1962, the institute was the most progressive design body of the Soviet Union. Professionals gathered to discuss the latest products and news from the international design community. The magazine, also called Technical Aesthetics, showed a thorough knowledge of the latest Westerns trends and innovations, which were often compared to Soviet offerings. Articles rehabilitated avant-garde movements such as Constructivism, which had laid the basis of Soviet design in the early 1920s but had been condemned by Stalin in favour of Socialist Realism. The magazine's distribution peaked at 30,000, impressive for a niche publication, and it ran from 1968 to 1989.

VNIITE's links outside the Soviet Union were strengthened when it began to represent the country within ICSID, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, an important world-wide professional body. VNIITE's visionary director, Yuri Soloviev, became first the vice-president and later the president of ICSID. In 1975 the first international design congress to take place in a Soviet country was held in Moscow. It was one of ICSID's biannual conferences and VNIITE played host, although its members were carefully watched during contact with the foreign guests. Overall, VNIITE's work remained in the theoretical realm, unsurprisingly considering its progressive attitude, but it did make an impact in graphic design where the sleek look of the magazine proved influential. It also had a hand in creating the pictograms used during the 1980 Moscow Olympics.