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Illic, Melanie J ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2219-9693> (2014) Women and Competition in State Socialist Societies: Soviet-era Beauty Contests. In: Competition in Socialist Society. Studies in the History of Russia and Eastern Europe . Routledge, London, pp. 159-175. ISBN 9780415747202

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/1258>

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in

Competition in Socialist Society on 25.07.2014, available online:

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Chapter 10

Women and Competition in State Socialist Societies:

Soviet Beauty Contests

Melanie Ilic

This chapter explores the notion of competition in state socialist societies through the prism of the Soviet-era beauty contests (*konkurs krasoty*). The Soviet-era beauty contests provide an example of how one particular Western model of competition in the socio-cultural sphere was adapted to a specific Eastern European local context and how such models of competition served to promote the break down of barriers between East and West during the final years of the cold war. The beauty contests are illustrative also of the internal fragility of the dominance of Russian-defined Soviet cultural norms, which faced particular challenges especially in the more Western-facing Baltic States, even as the central authorities in Moscow under Gorbachev sought to adapt their own practices to perceived Western values.

An exploration of the Soviet-era beauty contests also enables us to examine the notion of competition within state socialist societies from a number of different perspectives.

Beauty was, and is, a highly contested notion in itself, and it is examined here not only in the context of the local and national Soviet competitions, but also in the related broader issues that were debated in the international arena. Likewise, there are competing notions of how gender is constructed, what constitutes femininity and how womanhood is, and should be, articulated. An exploration of the Soviet-era beauty contests also allows an assessment to be made of the impact of competition and commodification on young women, on their individual and collective levels of empowerment and disempowerment.

The Soviet beauty contests have so far received very little attention in the academic literature. When the beauty contests have been mentioned in academic studies it has tended to be in the wider context of their connection to the changing socio-cultural status and media representations of women resulting from Gorbachev's policies of glasnost' and perestroika.¹ The present study draws on contemporary Russian and English-language magazine and newspaper reports and subsequent critical commentaries on the beauty contests. It is worth noting that the beauty contests were not extensively covered in either of the two major Russian-language women's magazines of the period, *Rabotnitsa* (*Woman Worker*) and *Krest'yanka* (*Peasant Woman*); and there was no coverage of the contests at all in the two women's magazines produced also in English-language copy for the international market, *Sovetskaya zhenshchina* (*Soviet Woman*) and *Zhenshchiny mira* (*Women of the Whole World*). This study, therefore, also makes use of the post-competition reflections of some of the contemporary observers and the contestants themselves that are available in a range of different media, including online.²

Soviet Women and Competition:

Russian and Soviet women's engagement in a broad range of 'competition' has a significant history in the twentieth century, and particularly in the Stalin period. From the beginning of the 1930s, Soviet women were involved in a range of workplace movements and mobilisation campaigns under the headings of socialist competition (*sotsialisticheskoe sorevnovanie*), shock work and Stakhanovism that aimed to raise the levels of productivity and economic output in industry and agriculture. One such Stakhanovite, Yevdokiya (Dusya) Viktorovna Vinogradova, was even dubbed 'Miss USSR' in a profile by a contemporary foreign observer. He argued that unlike the 'dubious and transient "fame" of a "Miss Europe"', Dusya's fame and popularity were 'founded on her creative work'.³

Soviet women were engaged also in other competitive events, such as those linked to their civil defence and paramilitary training.⁴ In the reporting of these events, the competitions were closely associated with the Stalinist rhetoric of equality and the post-revolutionary reconstructions of womanhood. These new Soviet heroines were lauded in the press for their hard work, loyalty to the state and devotion to socialism. They were publicly feted and rewarded for their efforts, just as the Soviet beauty queens were feted and rewarded several decades later.

Significantly less well known, and nowhere reported in the standard histories of this period, is the fact that, outside of the Soviet Union, Russian women living in emigration in Europe took part in a series of beauty contests from the late 1920s.⁵

Although not the originator of such competitions, Maurice de Waleffe was the organiser of a Miss France beauty contest in Paris in 1921. In December 1928 he extended invitations to other countries to participate in a Miss Europe 1929 competition. From 1929, the main organiser of the Miss Russia pageants was the magazine *Illyustrirovannaya Rossiya* (*Illustrated Russia*), published in Paris for the émigré community. To compete in the pageants, women had to be unmarried, aged between 16 and 25, and of an ‘unstained reputation’. They also had to hold a Russian passport and be of Russian descent. The first reported ‘Miss Russia’ was Kira Sklyarova, crowned in Paris in 1927. The first official Miss Russia identified by *Illyustrirovannaya Rossiya* was Irina Levitskaya, appointed in 1929.⁶ *Illyustrirovannaya Rossiya* also published short articles on the selection of beauty queens to represent the Russian émigré communities in other parts of the world.

The winner of the official *Illyustrirovannaya Rossiya* Miss Russia competition each year progressed to represent the local Russian community at the Miss Europe contest. One of these, Miss Russia 1933, Tat’yana Maslova, was crowned Miss Europe in Madrid in 1933. The Miss Europe 1934 contest, staged in Hastings in the United Kingdom, saw the participation of both Miss Russia 1934, Yekaterina Antonova, and her runner-up, Miss Siberia, Nadezhda Fomenko. Russian women continued to participate in these contests until 1939, when the outbreak of war brought the pageants to a halt.

Although beauty pageants were never an official part of Soviet culture in the pre-Gorbachev period, positive images of female youth and beauty were often used to represent different aspects of the life of the country in its celebratory media. For

example, Lola Nisso Ismailova has explained how she came to be chosen as the face of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Tadzhik Soviet Republic in 1949. After reporters descended on the republic for the official celebrations, with the permission of the rector, a competition was held amongst the young women at the state university. Ismailova was chosen to have her photo taken, dressed in national costume, for an article published in the prestigious journal *Ogonek* in December 1949.⁷ Four decades later, women from Soviet Central Asia were taking part in national beauty contests as well as the international Miss Asia competitions staged in London and elsewhere. In other areas of Soviet life, working women modelled in parades of new uniforms and, according to one observer, these were ‘the closest thing to a beauty pageant in the USSR. It was an honour to participate in one’.⁸

The International Arena:

In Western Europe and in other parts of the world, beauty contests were revived after the end of the Second World War. The first official post-war Miss World contest was staged by its British organisers in London in 1951. As well as competing in their own national-level competitions, women from a number of Eastern bloc countries, but not the Soviet Union, took part in the Miss World contests in the years that followed. By the time beauty contests were beginning to be staged in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, however, such competitions had already been the subject of much criticism for many years in both the East and the West, especially from feminists. In the East, before Gorbachev came to office in 1985, Soviet ideological thinking had condemned the idea of the beauty contest as degrading to women and symptomatic of capitalist

exploitation. In the West, feminist activists, similarly critical of the demeaning nature of judging women on the basis of their physical attributes, staged protests outside the Miss America contest in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1968, and caused massive disruption to the Miss World contest in London in 1970.⁹ In 1988, just as the Soviet Union was preparing to put forward its own contestants on the international beauty pageant circuit, British television networks took the decision no longer to broadcast such competitions on their channels.

Just at the time when popular and mass media interest in beauty contests was winding down in the West, the Soviet Union was beginning to support its participants at overseas competitions. As part of his policies of glasnost' and perestroika, Gorbachev attempted to rebuild the image of the Soviet Union in the international arena. His revised notions of women's roles and appearance can be seen as part of a broader attempt to inculcate new social and cultural values in Soviet society. The secretary of the Moscow Komsomol (the youth section of the Communist Party), Vyacheslav Pan'kin, is reported as having stated at a press-conference for the Moscow Beauty 1988 contest that, 'our contest is mostly not commercial; it has an important social and educational function – "to rescue women from urbanity, from becoming lost in the crowd, to raise the prestige of women in society"' .¹⁰

By the late 1980s, Soviet women were beginning to compete in overseas beauty contests. In November 1988, Yekaterina Chilichkina, to whom the 'Audience Choice' award had been made at the first ever 'Moscow Beauty' contest on 12 June 1988, was crowned as Queen of Europe in Helsinki.¹¹ Also in 1988, with the assistance of the Tadzhikistan Komsomol, Zamira Amirbekova competed at the Miss Asia contest in

London, where she was awarded the 'Audience Choice' prize.¹² In the following year, on 13 March 1989, Irina Suvorova was the Soviet Union's representative at the Mrs World competition in Las Vegas. Later that same year, Anna Gorbunova, who had been placed second at the Moscow Countryside Beauty contest on 1 January 1989 and second at the first ever Miss USSR contest on 21 May 1989, was selected as the Soviet Union's contender at the Miss World beauty contest in Hong Kong on 22 November 1989, where she was awarded the title 'Miss Photogenic'. On 13 December 1990, Ol'ga Fedorova, from Leningrad, was crowned 'Miss Elegance' at the Miss Baltic Sea competition in Helsinki.¹³

Beauty Contests in the Soviet Context:

In June 1988, the first 'Moscow Beauty' competition was widely reported by the media around the world, but by this time similar beauty contests had already been staged in other regions and republics of the Soviet Union. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, two further 'Moscow Beauty' contests were held, and three 'Miss USSR' competitions had been staged, with the winners being propelled on to the global stage. These national competitions were accompanied also by a whole range of lower level pageants, after which many of the contestants simply returned to their everyday lives. Others, however, went on to compete in a range of prestigious international beauty contests, successfully auditioned for the cinema and for film roles, whilst some took up careers in the beauty, modelling and fashion industries.

The Soviet beauty contests, particularly in their initial format, did not simply mirror their Western equivalents. There was an evident attempt to adapt the format of this particular form of competition to the local context and to draw on Soviet traditions.¹⁴ This included the decision not to use the title 'Miss' in the Moscow Beauty contests. In the early stages, and certainly before foreign sponsors became heavily involved, many of the regional beauty contests, having been sanctioned by the central authorities in Moscow, were organised by the local Komsomol (to which many young people were affiliated) with the assistance of sports clubs, and sometimes with the support of various trade union bodies. The Komsomol, sports clubs and trade unions had readily available managerial and administrative structures with which to support the preparations and staging of the competitions: they had access to the local media outlets to publicise the competitions and to put out a call for contestants; they had access to the local Palaces of Culture and Houses of Friendship, and to sports halls and theatres, where the contests were held; and, crucially, they had much prior experience of staging mass entertainment events such as gymnastic, dance and sports displays, as well as drama performances and film screenings.

From what it is possible to determine about the early local and regional 'Miss' competitions, these were as much talent shows and celebrations of national culture as they were beauty contests. The contestants wore their own 'casual' clothes during the early stages, and as the competition progressed they wore evening gowns and national costumes. A 'swimsuit' section of the competitions is rarely mentioned in the press reports. Nevertheless, some of the staged performances at the beauty contests still drew scathing comments from spectators that reflected, in part, an on-going debate about the competing cultural values of the Soviet Union and the West. The supporters

of traditional Russian and Soviet values stated a preference for more cultured pursuits, such as classical ballet over aerobics as a means of judging physical movement.¹⁵

They criticised the contestants for being ‘empty-headed mannequins’ and

‘Americanized beauties – all hair and no bust’.¹⁶

The first reported contest, staged in Siberia on Monday 16 March 1987, saw the ‘Miss Irkutsk’ crown being awarded to Lyudmila Semdyakina.¹⁷ No photographs appear to have been taken of her as the winner of the competition. Semdyakina was one of over ten thousand applicants to the competition from a local population estimated at around half a million people. She herself was described as being keen on sports and ballet, enjoyed reading, had a sociable character and, unlike many of the other contestants, she did not smoke.

There were three preliminary rounds to the competition, in which the contestants were required to engage in various types of stage performance, including ‘scenic exercises’, sports activities and dancing, before a final group of eight was selected. The finalists were then tested on their social and conversational skills, deportment and gait.

Semdyakina was judged ‘the most charming and attractive’. In a covert criticism of Western-style influences on Soviet culture, one of the judges of the competition, Andrei Romanov, head of the youth sports centre, condemned the ‘discotheque-style’, stereotyped behaviour and appearance that was prevalent amongst young people and which many of the contestants had tried to imitate. For him, this was ‘beneath all criticism from any aesthetic point of view’.¹⁸ The first Miss Odessa, Natasha Atamamova, was crowned in the autumn of 1987 and, from the photographic evidence, appears to have been literally served up on a plate.¹⁹

The selection of the first ‘Vilnius Beauty’ in March 1988 was staged in the form of a ‘concert’.²⁰ In the elimination rounds, 110 applicants were reduced to 76, then 32, with 13 to go forward to the final ‘review’. The final round included a multi-lingual question and answer session and a dance presentation in evening wear, followed by a swimsuit parade. Six of the finalists were awarded prizes, with the choice for the overall title made between two candidates. In the end, a 17-year-old, blond-haired, blue-eyed machinist, Ingrid Mikelionite, was awarded the crown. In the following month, April 1988, Mikelionite was present at the crowning of 18-year-old student, Sintiya Yenerte, as Miss Riga 1988.²¹ In Riga, ten finalists, ranging between the ages of 17 and 23 years old, were chosen from 600 applicants. Each of the finalists was presented with the opportunity to appear in films and TV commercials. In reporting on this event, the *Izvestiya* journalist pointed out that at this time one hundred Muscovites were being scrutinised in the second elimination round in preparation for the Moscow Beauty 1988 contest.

The Moscow Beauty 1988 contest, partly sponsored by the German fashion company Burda Moden, was held over several days in June. Tens of thousands of applicants had queued up months before the final to submit their forms to the contest organisers, the newspaper *Moskovskii komsomolets*, in Gorky Park, with the line stretching the one kilometre distance back to Park Kultury metro station. The public staging of the final rounds took place in front of an 11,000 strong audience in Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium. The jury was chaired by popular singer Muslim Magomaev and included the well-known actress Anastasia Vertinskaya, herself referred to as the ‘anti-Soviet-looking Soviet beauty’. There were two parts to the prize at stake: the Moscow

Beauty title and crown, and a professional modelling contract. The final saw 36 contestants whittled down to 18. Initially, the contestants had to take part in three preliminary rounds: 'first impressions', when they were called to walk across the stage to pick up their number cards; 'aerobics', for which contestants wore gym clothes, in order that the jury could confirm their opinions on physical movement; and, finally, the most nerve-racking of all, 'harmony and grace', with the contestants now dressed in swimming costumes.²²

At the second stage of the Moscow Beauty-88 competition, the 'fantasy' round placed more emphasis on getting to know the contestants personally. The 18 contestants were now reduced to a final six. On the third day of the competition the finalists were asked to imagine what life would be like in one hundred years time.²³ All were dressed in swimming costumes provided by Yves St Laurent. The final section and highpoint of the programme was entitled 'unadorned harmony'. The contestants were dressed in luxurious fur coats provided by a local company, which were then casually thrown aside, leaving the contestants standing in even more revealing swimming costumes, but now without make-up and bare-footed. Not surprisingly, the women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* questioned how such a spectacle was supposed to raise the prestige of women!²⁴

Likewise, the first Miss USSR contest in May 1989 involved regional and republican-level rounds of preliminary competitions. One such local competition was held in the circus venue of the Tadzhik capital of Dushanbe on 17 March 1989.²⁵ Over three hundred applications were received, from which 60 were selected. Eighteen contestants took part in the final stage of the competition.²⁶

Again, this was conducted along the lines of a talent contest, with some of the entrants dressed in national costume. There was also a dance section where the competitors wore casual sports clothing and, rather bizarrely, were accompanied on stage by male body builders. In this strictly Muslim republic, there was not even a hint of a swimsuit section to the competition. The winner, Sitora Nazarova, was not crowned as a beauty queen, but as the Princess of the Tadzhik New Year, and she did not go forward to compete at the Miss USSR contest. The runners up, the appointed Miss Supermodel, Tamara Malikhina, and a rather reluctant Miss Cinema, Takhmina Dzheraeva, did compete for the Miss USSR title. Illustrative of both gender and cultural-religious conflict was the fact that Dzheraeva had been warned by her father that he would disown her and would not allow her to return home if she appeared in a bathing costume on the national stage. During the television broadcast final of the Miss USSR competition, Dzheraeva was filmed in a swimsuit looking distinctly uncomfortable and wiping a tear from her eye.

In total, there were 70 potential finalists for the Miss USSR 1989 title, but only 35 places were made available, so competition between the republics and regions was fierce. Despite a whole range of potential nationwide contestants having been identified, six of the final places were given to entrants from the Moscow region. The final selection and choice of candidates is illustrative, therefore, also of the degree of internal competition that existed within the Soviet Union between its constituent regions and republics.

The Lithuanian authorities refused to allow their candidate, 18-year-old schoolgirl Liucija Gurzdyte, to go forward to the Miss USSR contest, despite her protestations, because they wanted her to represent their own country at the upcoming Miss World competition. Gurzdyte, however, seemingly did not compete in any further beauty contests. Estonia put forward a different candidate to the Miss USSR contest (Eha Urbsalu, from Tallinn) than the official Miss Estonia, Cathy Korju, whom they identified to send forward to represent the republic at the Miss World competition. Korju, likewise, did not take part in Miss World 1989. In the end, the Soviet Union had only one official candidate at the Miss World competition in November 1989: Anna Gorbunova, who had placed second at the Miss USSR 1989 contest in May. In another example of cultural-religious competition, Gorbunova was reported as having gone through a baptism to become a ‘true Christian’ at a Ukrainian church ceremony during a trip to Sydney in February 1990.²⁷ Latvia, amongst all of the Soviet Republics, had its own candidate at the Miss World 1989 contest, Ina Magone.

Extensive pre-competition training, rehearsals and choreography took place in the outskirts of Moscow over several weeks in May 1989 in advance of the Miss USSR final. Some contenders arrived late for the rehearsals as they had yet to complete their end-of-year exams at their place of study. The pre-competition training included gymnastics, swimming and exercise classes, as well as practice runs for hairstyling, make-up and ‘aesthetics’. Discipline was firmly enforced, with any late arrivals to training sessions publicly castigated. The finalists were also expected to take part in a number of promotional events, including a boat ride with journalists and sponsors along the river Moskva. This was the first time many of the contestants had visited the Soviet Union’s capital city, and they mostly came unprepared for the chaos that lay

ahead of them: the promised clothing and make-up for their stage presentations failed to materialise; the electricians at the venue could not cope with the pressure of numerous hairdryers all running at once; and the advertised compère, Marcello Mastroianni, with whom the contestants were supposed to engage in witty banter, simply did not turn up. On 21 May, a six-hour spectacular of the final was staged in front of an invitation-only audience and was broadcast on national television.²⁸

At this competition, in addition to the prestigious Miss USSR crown and title, two other prizes were on offer.²⁹ The contestants could choose between putting themselves forward for screen tests for film roles or for a ‘supermodel’ award. The contestants interested in following up a career in cinema were required to film short sequences, directed by a representative from the Mosfilm studios, exclaiming ‘fire!’ and ‘I love you’ into the camera. Anna Portnaya was chosen as ‘Miss Kinoshans USSR’. In addition to appearing in a couple of films, Portnaya reached the top 12 as the USSR’s candidate at the Miss Europe 1992 contest. The contestants for the modelling award were directed by a Lithuanian choreographer. The candidate representing Estonia at Miss USSR 1989, 17-year-old former child star Eha Urbsalu, was chosen as ‘Supermodel USSR’ and went on to win the World Supermodel contest in California in August 1989. Urbsalu also competed alongside Portnaya in the Miss Europe 1992 contest.

The final selection of Miss USSR 1989 was made by a mixture of jury and television audience voting. The success of 17-year-old Yulia Sukhanova was widely reported around the world. Sukhanova had also competed at the Moscow Beauty competition in 1988, despite officially being too young. The award of the Miss USSR 1989 title

appears to have marked the end of her participation in beauty contests, but it also marked the beginning of a whole set of problems with the competition organisers.

Lena Moskalenko has outlined the different stages involved in the Moscow Beauty 1989 competition, the final of which was held in September.³⁰ The preliminary stage involved selection by a local panel in elimination rounds held across the region. At the second stage, 130 contestants were reduced to 32 semi-finalists after taking part in a stage performance involving a fashion show, dancing in a swimming costume and a short verbal presentation. An intensive training camp was then organised in the Crimea involving a fitness programme, make-up lessons, runway preparation and photograph sessions. The contestants' measurements were taken regularly. The semi-final ran over two evenings in the form of 'concerts'. It consisted of a line-up, a fashion show, a pre-recorded TV report on Moscow's architectural heritage, dancing in swimwear and an accompanied walk across stage as if being presented at court. Six contestants were chosen to go through to the final.

The festive style of the Soviet-era beauty contests was highlighted at the Moscow Beauty 1991 competition, involving a 'complicated mechanism of preliminary selection' of the 12 finalists.³¹ A 'time of the year' theme was used for the final of the competition with each of the finalists being symbolically allocated a month. The members of the audience were invited to vote for their favourite by placing their ballot into special containers housed in the foyer of the Hotel Rossiya. The eventual winner was 'August', and student Maya Shulenina was crowned Moscow Beauty 1991.

Contesting Beauty:

Beauty itself is a much contested concept and no more so than in the Soviet context. Despite adopting the beauty contest format, most Soviet commentators and the participants themselves argued that beauty was something more than outward appearance. Nevertheless, for many of the contests, applicants still had to meet certain age and physiological criteria: officially, contestants had to be no younger than 16 or 17 (though even some of the winners were younger than this) and no older than 27; a much taller than average height requirement was in place (over 5'8" / 170 cms); and there was, of course, the obligatory 36-24-36 (90-60-90 cms) desired body contour. Most contests also required the applicants to be unmarried and without children.³²

Lena Moskalenko, who took part in the Moscow Beauty 1989 competition as a 'participating observer', has outlined two historical models of the physical attributes of beauty evident in Russian culture. The most prevalent of these models was widespread in rural and peasant societies: womanhood and motherhood went hand-in-hand and the ideal woman was 'big and heavy, with a big bottom and a huge bust'. In elite society, the ideal was 'much slimmer and taller, with long "nervous" fingers, and thin waists'. The rural woman was considered to be 'more tender and generous than the lean and skinny with flat chests' model of the aristocratic counterpart.³³ In Soviet culture, hard work, kindness and loyalty were valued over the 'cold and selfish' attributes of a beauty queen.³⁴

Moskalenko herself has argued that:

Beauty was never contested in Russia. As I understand it, in Russian culture beauty is not something to show, something to offer, something to portray – beauty is something to discover. It requires the effort, the subjective effort of learning and exploring beauty.³⁵

The most pervasive construct of Soviet female beauty was that it was an inner quality, not related to outward physical appearance, and that it was something that could be improved upon and perfected. Andrei Romanov, organiser of the Miss Irkutsk competition in March 1987, argued that, ‘real beauty, just like talent, is not simply a gift of nature, but is the result of persistent effort in improving oneself’.³⁶ Moscow Beauty contestants were expected not just to be beautiful, but also to be ‘well-spoken, intelligent, graceful, friendly, have a good personality, and also have the characteristics of a true Muscovite’ (though it was never made clear what these were).³⁷

One of the most successful of the Soviet-era beauty contest winners, Angelika Yalinskaya has stated that, ‘the most important element of beauty is your inner world. Beauty comes from within. My face is a mirror of my soul’. Yalinskaya won the first ever Miss Belarus title when she was 18 years old and, in 1991 she was awarded the title of Miss Photo USSR.³⁸ In a different area of the Soviet beauty pageant world, Yelena Nesterovich was crowned as the first Circus Princess in Moscow in August 1989. She attributed her win to ‘grace and charm, professional skill, a sense of humour and the ability to dance’.³⁹

Nevertheless, hints that a new concept of beauty was under consideration are revealed by public discussion about the possibility of publishing Western-style women's magazines in the Soviet Union. Such discussions placed new emphasis on outward appearance as a critical marker of beauty. For example, the editor-in-chief of the Polish fashion magazine *Mir mody* (*World of Fashion*), Leokadiya Vysotskaya-Tempskaya, outlined her view of the contemporary woman as someone who was 'healthy, well-dressed, having style and upbringing, and demonstrating an awareness of her good and bad sides'.⁴⁰

The contemporary debates about the nature of beauty are brought into stark relief in a tabloid-style news report about the 1988 Snow Queen festival in Berdichev, near Kiev. Although it has not been possible to verify the account presented in this article, the debates it rehearses are worth examining here.⁴¹ The winner of the Berdichev Snow Queen title was reported as weighing 340lbs (over 24 stone) and she was so heavy that she had fallen through the ice during the crowning ceremony. The local mayor claimed the incident could have been avoided if the jury had selected a slim and sexy beauty queen, instead of the woman he criticised as 'a factory-working hippo'. She was the sort of woman, he claimed, who appealed mostly to the elderly men in Moscow. Perhaps drawing rather too heavily on negative stereotypes, he continued, 'Personally, I think we should subscribe to the Western standard of beauty. Not all Soviet women are fat and ugly. Soviet women can be lovely to look at too'. The new Snow Queen is reported as having robustly defended her win with the counter-attack that, 'Western women are skinny and weak; I am healthy and strong. Western women couldn't lift a sack of potatoes; I can carry two'. Many of the local men supported her as winner of the competition. A local housewife, though, wanted to

drag Soviet women into the twentieth century, claiming ‘we should have the right to look and feel pretty too’.

Despite persistent claims that beauty is an inner quality and a slow drift towards Western standards of appearance and dress, there was one area in which the Soviet Union remained unable to compete: dentistry. During a trip to the United States, Miss USSR 1990, 17-year-old Maria Kezha, is reported to have made two trips to a dental practice in Philadelphia to be worked on by a dentist who was herself a former teenage model.⁴² Kezha was accompanied in the United States by one of the Miss USSR-90 runners-up, 19-year-old Lauma Zemzare. In New Orleans they were schooled by a modelling agency on how to walk a runway. At a time when the cold war was drawing to a close, one of the American reporters of these events used this opportunity to ensure that the benefits of liberal democracy were extolled: Kezha is reported to have commented that ‘people must be free – that is right’. The reporter also noted an overt criticism of the Soviet authorities in Moscow from Latvian-born Zemzare, who was reported to be ‘not so enamoured of Soviet domination of her republic’.⁴³

The final years of the Soviet regime, under the growing influence of Western concepts of beauty and through the agency of the beauty contest, witnessed a significant shift in the ideals of female form and appearance towards a more uniform Westernised standard. The women’s magazine *Rabotnitsa*, though, perhaps presented a more realistic vision of the future facing Soviet women. Directly under a photo of Anna Portnaya (Miss Kinoshans), Yulia Sukhanova (title winner) and Eha Urbsalu (Supermodel USSR) in their crowing glory at the Miss USSR-89 contest, *Rabotnitsa*

published photos of three beleaguered Soviet women under the titles of ‘Miss Work’, ‘Miss Shortage’ and ‘Miss Queue’!⁴⁴

Sexism, the Media and the Status of Women:

The late 1980s marked the beginning of an overt sexualisation, commodification and commercialisation particularly of young women in Soviet society, culture and the economy. The beauty contests were only one element of this. Whilst some women themselves embraced the opportunities for a new sexual freedom, the changes also sparked a vociferous critical response, and one that was not significantly out of line with a Western feminist critique. In the Soviet context, the danger existed that anyone who opposed the new libertarianism could be charged with supporting old-style authoritarianism.

It is important to remember here that at this late stage of the Soviet Union’s history, so-called ‘men’s magazines’, such as *Playboy*, were still banned and even women’s magazines were carefully scrutinised for any images considered to be potentially pornographic. Sex was rarely talked about and the public display of the female body was considered to be indecent and immoral. The appearance of scantily dressed women on a public stage in the late 1980s was indeed a novelty. Speaking as an invited guest at the filming of Miss USSR 1989, the journalist Svetlana Kuznitsina argued that, ‘Soviet people take the most vulgar and strange aspects of Western life and look at them as a model of a liberal society’.⁴⁵ For her, and others, the wholesale adoption of Western practices was not necessarily a sign of political or cultural

advancement. Similarly, one Western journalist commented on the Moscow Beauty contest that it presented, ‘a fantasy of Western femininity and sexuality through a Soviet prism. It was hard to tell who came out worse, the imitator or the imitated’.⁴⁶

The sexist implications of swimsuit parades were not evident to everyone in the audience, or indeed the contestants themselves, who seemingly sometimes approached this part of the competition in a rather naïve and childlike manner. The eventual winner of the Moscow Beauty-88 contest, 16-year-old Maria Kalinina, is reported to have strutted lasciviously across the stage in a Betty Boop-style parody, ‘in which she wore a green and white striped skirt over a thong bikini and kept flipping up the skirt and bending over. “Whoop!” she’d say’.⁴⁷ The day after the competition, and describing herself as a real Alice in Wonderland, Kalinina was photographed back at school sitting her maths and Spanish exams.⁴⁸ Two years later, during a trip to the United States in 1990, Kalinina strenuously defended her decision to turn down offers to pose for *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, stating instead that she wished to launch her career as a serious actress.⁴⁹

The winner of the second Moscow Beauty competition, held in September 1989, 20-year-old Larisa Litichevskaya, however, was not so fortunate. Minutes after being crowned, Litichevskaya was persuaded by the contest organisers to agree to pose for some ‘artistic photographs’. She claimed she was ‘almost ordered’ to sign up under the threat of losing her title. The photographs were taken a few days later at a holiday resort by a Soviet émigré photographer. A couple of months later, Litichevskaya was informed that the pictures had been bought by *Playboy*. Angry and embarrassed, she turned down an invitation to attend a celebration hosted by the magazine in Moscow

in January 1990. The photos eventually appeared in a special 'women of Russia' edition in February 1990.⁵⁰ Later in 1990, Litichevskaya went on to be crowned Miss World Cup in Italy. This appears to have been the end of her beauty contest career, though she was subsequently credited with a number of film roles.

For one of the winners of a very different Komsomol-sponsored contest in the summer of 1991, however, the sexualisation of Soviet society signalled an important shift in the regime's political agenda and cultural outlook. 18-year-old Natal'ya Patsura was awarded the title Miss Bust. She argued that beauty contests were a step along the way to achieving a genuine free spirit, and that they marked a poignant ending to 'totalitarianism, hypocrisy, Puritanism and bigotry'.⁵¹ Soon after, however, the power of the media again came into play. Patsura took the step of seeking damages from a Russian magazine editor whom she claimed had misused her image in his publication alongside an article about the involvement of Russian models in drug smuggling.⁵²

Competition and Power:

The potential for media and sexual exploitation was not the only danger that faced beauty contestants and winners. At the beauty contests, the organisers, sponsors and agents had a significant advantage in the competition for power and control. Before taking part in the competitions, contestants were often required to sign contracts that handed over control of their personal appearances, limited them in speaking to the press and denied them photographic opportunities. As one newspaper report pointed

out after the Miss USSR-90 contest, on the one hand, the organisers had a role in protecting the contestants and promoting their interests; on the other hand, this left the contestants in a very dependent position.⁵³ The commercial value of the beauty contests was soon recognised by new Russian businessmen, who charged high commissions to act as agents. There were a number of ways in which the winners could be exploited, and they had to assert themselves against such power plays. The Burda Moden contract that Maria Kalinina won as part of her Moscow Beauty-88 title turned out not to be for her to work as a model, as she had anticipated, but initially at a desk job.

Yulia Sukhanova encountered problems virtually as soon as she was crowned Miss USSR 1989. She herself publicly admitted to finding the whole competition rather embarrassing. Although she was only 17 years old, the organisers of the contest made every attempt to block Sukhanova's efforts to allow someone to chaperone her during a scheduled visit to the United States. She was threatened that she would be stripped of her title and another contestant would be sent to the Miss World contest instead of her if she did not fulfil her contractual duties.

Eventually, Sukhanova took her complaints against the contest organisers, a company called Venets, to the press.⁵⁴ She claimed that the contract she had signed in advance of the contest was invalid as it had not been counter-signed by her mother, whilst Sukhanova herself was still a minor. Some of the other contestants had refused to sign the contract altogether as it was far too restrictive. During the wrangling over the contract, Sukhanova claimed that the director of Venets, Yuri Sergeevich Kushnerev, had blocked her attempts to work independently. Sukhanova's applications for a visa

to enable her to travel abroad were repeatedly turned down. The first Miss USSR did eventually make it to the United States with the help of Mikhail Khordorkovsky, who was at that time a high-ranking Komsomol official, and his American business associate.⁵⁵

And the winner is...:

It would appear from a number of reports that beauty and physical attributes were not always the most prized constituent in the selection of some of the competition winners. As well as being personally insulting about the Berdichev Snow Queen's physical size and appearance, the local mayor is also reported to have claimed she only won her title because she was a loyal Communist Party member.⁵⁶ Moskalenko has also argued that the Soviet ambition to promote Russian beauty abroad meant that candidates from the emerging fashion industry with previous experience of modelling and the runway had a ready-made advantage in the selection process. Such contestants also had established contacts and relationships with the types of people who were chosen to sit on the judging panels. She has suggested further that the exchange of 'obvious favours' helped to secure votes for some of the finalists of the Moscow Beauty-89 contest. Even so, the overall winner was the preferred choice of the competition's sponsors, the Polish company Medimpex: 'it is a business where big money is at stake'; "those who pay choose the music".⁵⁷

Several years after the award of the Moscow Beauty-88 title, one of the competition organisers, Marina Parusnikova, revealed the following about the behind-the-scenes

negotiations. It was only at the final stage of the competition, by which time the number of contestants had been reduced to six, that the organisers thought it prudent to examine the participants' passports. At this late stage, it was revealed that one of the finalists, Oksana Fandera, had travelled all the way from Odessa to take part in the competition. As she was not a Moscow resident, she could not be awarded the title. Another of the finalists, Irina Suvorova, turned out to be married and a mother, but the organisers decided not to disqualify her. Yet another, Yelena Durneva, had a distinctly un-Russian sounding name, and after some consideration it was thought inappropriate to award her the title.

This left only three possibilities. Yelena Peredreeva was considered to be too 'vampish' and not to meet the ideal physical requirements to be selected as the title holder. Chilichkina was selected for the 'Audience Choice' award. It seems that Maria Kalinina was crowned, not for her looks and beauty alone, but also because she had a very typical Russian first name and surname. Parusnikova later added that Kalinina's knowledge of a foreign language, her social skills, sense of humour and a winning smile had also helped in the decision to crown her as the first 'Beauty of Moscow'.⁵⁸

¹ See, for example, E. Waters, 'Soviet Beauty Contests', in I. Kon and J. Riordan (eds), *Sex and Russian Society*, London: Pluto, 1993, pp. 116-34. See also S. Bridger, R. Kay and K. Pinnick, *No More Heroines: Russia, Women and the Market*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 28-31, 168-70, and B. McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 199-201.

² See, for example, L. Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition: "Moscow Beauty 1989"', in C.B. Cohen, R. Wilk and B. Stoeltje (eds), *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests, and Power*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 61-74.

³ G. Friedrich, *“Miss USSR”: the story of Dusya Vinogradova*, Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1936.

⁴ See, for example, M. Ilic, ‘Soviet Women and Civil Defense Training in the 1930s’, in *Minerva Journal of Women and War*, no. 1, vol. 2, Spring 2008, pp. 100-13.

⁵ For photographs of the winners and other information, online. Available HTTP: <<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100307/158118171.html>> (accessed July 2013) and <http://www.pageantopolis.com/Int_past/europe_1929-1938.htm> (accessed July 2013)

⁶ When the first woman chosen as Miss Russia 1929, Valentina Osterman, was discovered as holding a German passport, she was disqualified and the crown was passed to Irina Levitskaya.

⁷ M. Kurbanova, ‘Krasavitsy Tadzhikistana. Kak slozhilis’ sud’by pervykh pobeditel’nits konkursov krasoty’, *Aziya-Plyus*: see online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.centralasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1190015820>> The photo appeared on the back cover of *Ogonek*, no. 50, December 1949.

⁸ D. Yakimenko, ‘The Very First Miss USSR’: see online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.realussr.com/ussr/the-very-first-miss-ussr/>> (accessed July 2013).

⁹ BBC 2, *Women*, episode 1, 8 March 2010. BBC R4, *The Reunion: Miss World 1970*, broadcast 10 September 2010.

¹⁰ *Rabotnitsa*, no. 8, 1988, p. 39.

¹¹ ‘Miss Yevropa-88’, *Izvestiya*, 15 November 1988.

¹² M. Kurbanova, ‘Krasavitsy Tadzhikistana: kak slozhilis’ sud’by pervykh pobeditel’nits konkursov krasoty’, see online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.centrasia.ru/news2.php?st=1190015820>> (accessed July 2013).

¹³ ‘Iz “Pribaltiiskoi” – v Khel’sinki’, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 14 December 1990.

¹⁴ See, for example, M. Grevnev and S. Romeikov, 'Posle bala', *Pravda*, 26 June 1988.

¹⁵ P. Freeman and J. Butler, 'After the Coronation, Moscow's First Beauty Queen Finds that Envy takes the Glamour out of Glasnost', *People*, no. 11, vol. 30, 12 September 1988.

¹⁶ Freeman and Butler, 'After the Coronation'.

¹⁷ 'Lyuda – "Miss Irkutsk"', *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 17 March 1987, p. 4. Taking their lead from the original Russian-language report, a Google search. Available HTTP: <<http://news.google.com/newspapers>> reveals that the contest was also reported on 18 March 1987 in the following, presumably syndicated, newspapers: *Anchorage Daily News*, *Gainesville Sun*, *Lewiston Journal*, *Palm Beach Post* and *The Spokesman Review*.

¹⁸ *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 17 March 1987, p. 4.

¹⁹ See online. Available HTTP: <http://www.weekend.od.ua/exclu_full.php?id=2425> (accessed July 2013).

²⁰ V. Zarovskii, 'Kto koroleva?', *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 8 March 1988; A. Chekuolis, 'Nekrasivyykh v Vil'nyuse net', *Izvestiya*, 13 March 1988; 'Legko li byt' krasavitssei?', *Krest'yanka*, no. 8, 1988, p. 27.

²¹ K. Markaryan, 'Miss Riga-88', *Izvestiya*, 28 April 1988. This article reports that a similar contest, in addition to Odessa and Vilnius, had already been held in Leningrad, but I have not been able to find any details of this, though a behind-the-scenes photo book is now available: *Soviet Beauty Queens*, New York: Dashwood Books, 2011.

²² *Rabotnitsa*, no. 8, 1988, p. 39. See also P. Timofeev, 'Moskovskie krasavitsy v Luzhnikakh', *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 12 June 1988.

²³ P. Timofeev, "'Korolevu" zovut Masha', *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 14 June 1988.

²⁴ *Rabotnitsa*, no. 8, 1988, p. 39.

²⁵ Extensive television coverage of this event is provided by an 'Inside Story' documentary, 'Miss USSR', broadcast by the BBC in 1989. See also the TV review by Walter Goodman entitled 'Soviet Bathing Beauties on Parade' in *New York Times*, 6 February 1990, p. 15.

²⁶ Kurbanova, 'Krasavitsy Tadzhikistana'.

²⁷ See online. Available HTTP: <<http://news.google.com>>: 'Soviet Beauty Queen Baptised in Sydney', *Gadsden Times*, 23 February 1990.

²⁸ BBC, 'Miss USSR'.

²⁹ 'Konkursy krasoty', *Izvestiya*, 4 December 1988.

³⁰ Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition', pp. 68-9.

³¹ See online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.bibliotekar.ru/divo/25-5.htm>>

³² See, for example, T. Ivanova and S. Bugaev, 'Kto v Soyuze vsekh milee...', *Izvestiya*, 20 August 1988 and *Pravda Ukrainy*, 23 August 1988; 'Miss-foto SSSR: priglasheyutsya devushki ot 17 do 25 let', *Izvestiya*, 4 September 1988. See also Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition', p. 70.

³³ Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition', p. 62.

³⁴ Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition', p. 65.

³⁵ Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition', p. 73.

³⁶ *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 17 March 1987, p. 4.

³⁷ Moskalenko, 'Beauty, Women and Competition', p. 69-70.

³⁸ See online. Available HTTP: <<http://belarus.esckaz.com/bio05.htm>> (accessed 24 July 2011). In the post-Soviet era, under her married name of Angelika Agurbash, she won the Mrs Russia title in 2002 and represented Belarus at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2005.

³⁹ *Sovetskaya zhenshchina*, no. 12, 1989, front cover and p. 28.

⁴⁰ 'Formula krasoty', *Sovetskaya zhenshchina*, no. 7, 1988, p. 33. The first mainstream British women's magazine to launch in Russian language was *Cosmopolitan*, but this was not until May 1994, after the Soviet Union had collapsed.

⁴¹ R. Dunn, 'Soviets Urged to Adopt Western Standards of Beauty', *Weekly World News*, 20 December 1988. Dunn does not provide a reference for his report and I have not been able to trace a Russian-language source for this contest to verify the claims made here. Dunn names the Snow Queen as Iona Kachanov, which would usually be a man's name.

⁴² M. Capuzzo, 'From Russia with Teeth', *Inquirer*, 28 November 1990. For Kezha's Miss USSR-90 win, see A. Romanov, 'Poznakomit'sya by... s "Miss SSSR-90"', *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 10 June 1990. On Kezha and Zemzare's visit to the United States, see also, 'From Russia with Lip Gloss: Miss USSR takes New York', *People*, no. 25, vol. 34, 24 December 1990.

⁴³ Capuzzo, 'From Russia with Teeth', *Inquirer*, 28 November 1990.

⁴⁴ *Rabotnitsa*, no. 7, 1989, p. 8.

⁴⁵ BBC, 'Miss USSR'. See also Goodman, *New York Times*, 6 February 1990.

⁴⁶ D. Remnick, 'Beauty and the East: the Bizarre "Miss Moscow" Pageant', *Washington Post*, 13 June 1988.

⁴⁷ D. Remnick, 'Beauty and the East'.

⁴⁸ 'Ya byla, tochno Alisa v Strane Chudes', *Izvestiya*, 14 June 1988. On Kalinina's win, see also 'Strasti po krasavitse', *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 14 June 1988.

⁴⁹ 'Miss Moscow Shatters Stereotypes During Visit', *LA Times*, 12 October 1990; 'Soviet Beauty Queen Denies Allegations of Affair with Gorbachev', *LA Times*, 17 May 1991. This news article picked up on an unnamed Soviet tabloid report's

speculation of a possible relationship between Kalinina and Gorbachev, wittily dubbed the ‘Mish-Mash Affair’!

⁵⁰ ‘Soviet Damsel in Dis-dress: Winner of Miss Moscow Beauty Contest Feels Betrayed by Photographer’, *Houston Chronicle*, 2 March 1990.

⁵¹ See online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.bibliotekar.ru/divo/25-22.htm>> (accessed July 2013). At the same competition, Lana Abdullina was awarded the ‘Miss Legs’ title.

⁵² “‘Miss Byust’-91 snyalas’ besplatno’, *Kommersant*’, 3 March 1994.

⁵³ A. Chereshev, ‘Krepostnye korolevy?’, *Pravda*, 24 June 1990. See also Moskalenko, ‘Beauty, Women and Competition’, p. 68.

⁵⁴ ‘Mezhdu “Ventsom” i “Koronoi”’, *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 27 August 1989. See also: Mark J. Porubcansky, ‘Soviet Beauty Queen finds Going is Tough’, *Anchorage Daily News*, 28 August 1989; Harriet Shapiro and Sarah Skolnik, ‘Here she Comes, Miss USSR!’, *People*, no. 13, vol. 32, 25 September 1989; and ‘Soviet Beauty Calls Life a Beast’, *USA Today*, 28 August 1989.

⁵⁵ ‘From Russia with Sex’, see online. Available HTTP: <<http://nymag.com/nymetro/nightlife/barsclubs/features/3047/index1.html>> (accessed July 2013)

⁵⁶ R. Dunn, ‘Soviets Urged to Adopt Western Standards of Beauty’.

⁵⁷ Moskalenko, ‘Beauty, Women and Competition’, p. 70-1.

⁵⁸ The original claim was reportedly made in the magazine *Inostranets*, but I have not been able to locate this publication. Marina Parusnikova repeated this information about the final selection process during a radio broadcast on 27 May 2011 in which she was interviewed alongside Maria Kalinina: see “‘Nazad v SSSR’: vsponimaem pervye konkursy krasoty SSSR’. The transcript of the broadcast is online. Available

HTTP: <<http://msk.kp.ru/daily/25692/896367>> (accessed July 2013). See also
Svetlana Kononova, 'Fleeting Beauty', 15 March 2010, online. Available HTTP:
<http://russiaprofile.org/culture_living/a1268677264.html> (accessed July 2013)