

Welcome to the Soviet Union: The Branding of a Socialist Modernity through Gender Equality, Cultural Superiority, and Technological Achievements, 1930s-1960s

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Abstract

This article examines how the Soviet Union constructed and promoted an international image of socialist modernity from the 1930s to the 1960s. Drawing on concepts from place branding and public diplomacy, it argues that Soviet promotional efforts should be understood not merely as propaganda but as a systematic, state-directed attempt to present socialism as a superior alternative to capitalism. The article focuses on three core themes that featured prominently in Soviet place branding: gender equality, cultural superiority, and technological achievement. Using Iceland as a case study, the article explores both the strategies employed by Soviet institutions and the reception of these messages in a small Western country strategically situated between East and West during the Cold War. Icelandic visitors to the Soviet Union, cultural intermediaries, friendship societies, and public debates provide insight into how Soviet narratives were transmitted, adapted, and contested abroad.

Keywords: Soviet place branding, Iceland, socialist modernity, gender equality, cultural Cold War, public diplomacy

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Introduction

Soviet strategies to secure support and recruit followers to the socialist project are well documented.¹⁾ The Soviet party-state relied on a complicated network of local and international actors to disseminate propaganda about the accomplishments of Soviet socialism, both at home and abroad.²⁾ This article provides an overview of how the Soviet Union sold itself to foreigners in the twentieth century. More specifically, it examines how the Soviet Union was presented in three key areas: gender equality, cultural superiority, and achievements in space and technology.

This allows for a focus on Soviet international projection as a form of place branding, understood not simply as promotional activity but as the strategic construction of a coherent and persuasive image of a political system and its associated social order.³⁾ While the concept of place branding is often applied to market-oriented and liberal contexts,⁴⁾ a detailed study of the Soviet case contributes to the emerging literature on non-liberal forms of public diplomacy and illiberal place branding.

Evaluating the success and outcomes of public diplomacy and related programmes in the twentieth century presents significant challenges.⁵⁾ To better understand how the Soviet state curated and promoted ideologically acceptable places to represent its core values, this analysis therefore includes a case study of Iceland, a small country that aligned itself firmly with the West during the Cold War. While the Cold War period is central to any analysis of Soviet branding efforts, this article draws on examples from the 1930s until the 1960s, a timeframe defined by the onset of the global campaign to present the Soviet Union as an alternative modernity to capitalism and the intensification of the Cold War competition between the two superpowers, particularly in space.⁶⁾

1) See, e.g., Nigel Gould-Davies, “The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy”, *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 2 (2003): 193-214; Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Anna A. Velikaya, “Soviet Public Diplomacy”, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18, no. 2 (2022): 77-92, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00193-0>.

2) Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (Transaction Publishers, 1978); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet Ideology and Propaganda, 1945-1959* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

3) Mihalís Kavaratzis, “Place Branding: A Review of Trends and Conceptual Models”, *The Marketing Review* 5, no. 4 (2005): 329-342, <https://doi.org/10.1362/146934705775186854>; Simon Anholt, “Definitions of Place Branding – Working towards a Resolution”, *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6, no. 1 (2010): 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.3>.

4) Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Nation Branding: A Useful Category for International History”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30, no. 4 (2019): 755-779, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2019.1671000>; Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Nation Branding: A Useful Category for International History”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30, no. 4 (2019): 755-779, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2019.1671000>.

5) Eytan Gilboa, “Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 55-77.

6) Choi Chatterjee, Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, and Deborah A. Field, *Russia's Long Twentieth Century: Voices, Memories, Contested Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016).

The focus on Iceland, geographically situated in the North-Atlantic between Moscow and Washington, allows for an exploration of the global web of state and non-state actors involved in the Soviet branding mission.⁷⁾ It also highlights how the Soviet message was perceived and debated abroad, in a country considered important both to Soviet and Western interests.⁸⁾ Therefore, an analysis that combines the strategies used to promote Soviet values and the Icelandic response to said strategies can increase our understanding of Soviet place branding and how it was ideologically driven.

Soviet place branding efforts can not be separated from the goal of promoting Soviet socialism as a credible alternative to the capitalist world order.⁹⁾ From its inception, the Soviet project was framed as a counter-model to Western capitalism which was clearly visible in socialist promotional efforts. Even if the Soviet state soon abandoned the idea of an international revolution, it always put much emphasis on raising awareness of the superiority of the socialist way of life over.¹⁰⁾ This ideological competition took on a new dimension during the Cold War, when the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, started openly competing and showcasing alternative views of modernity.¹¹⁾

The overall presentation of the Soviet Union as a leader of global socialism and a legitimate alternative to capitalism provides the ideological framework for how Soviet socialism was actively promoted on the global scene. Centrally controlled propaganda agencies employed “ideological workers”¹²⁾ in charge of crafting a unified image of Soviet values, and they got the message across to all the relevant cultural, academic, scientific, and technological institutions in Soviet society. Additionally, several important agencies oversaw the promotion and execution of the same mission towards foreigners, including nurturing relationships with foreign visitors and guests.¹³⁾

In contrast to market-driven branding strategies, Soviet place branding was centrally orchestrated, non-competitive, and explicitly tied to ideological legitimation. Its primary objective was to present socialism as a superior model of modernity, while conventional aims for place branding, such as attracting investment or increasing tourism, were secondary. This perspective states that Soviet promotional efforts can not be dismissed as merely propaganda,

7) Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Kristinn og Þóra: Rauðir þræðir* (Mál og menning, 2021).

8) Valur Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins: Samskipti Íslands og Bandaríkjanna, 1945-1960* (Vaka-Helgafell, 1996).

9) Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One*.

10) Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

11) Caute, *The Dancer Defects*; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2012); David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*; Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One*.

12) Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One*, 12.

13) Fayet, “VOKS”; Andrew Jacobs, *Contact and Control: Americans Visit the Soviet Union, 1956-1985* (doctoral dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2019), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Igor B. Orlov and Alexey D. Popov, *See USSR! Inostrannye turisty i prizrak potemkinskikh dereven'* (Izd-atel'skii dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2018).

but should be analysed as a systematic and state-coordinated attempt to construct an internationally legible “brand” of socialist modernity.

The article is structured in the following way. First, the Soviet organisation of how to promote the socialist project abroad is discussed with examples of how this mission was executed in Iceland. Each of the three core branding values – gender equality, cultural superiority, and technological achievement – is then examined in separate sections, using Icelandic debates and reactions to Soviet promotional materials and visits to the Soviet Union to cast light on the overall branding method. Finally, a concluding section synthesises the findings and reflects on the broader implications of illiberal place branding as practised by the Soviet socialist state in the 1930s–1960s.

“See USSR”: The Branding of the Soviet Union as a Paradise for Workers

The most well-known slogan for advertising the Soviet Union as a destination is “See USSR”, which dates back to the early 1930s.¹⁴⁾ As a slogan, it fully identifies the spirit of the country and its mission: in order to understand what was underway in the Soviet Union and to counter the loud criticism of the system in the capitalist world media, you needed to see it with your own eyes. Writing about the incredible accomplishments of socialism was not enough, the Soviet state wanted visitors to come and see happy women on their way to work in a vibrant urban area; experience classical concerts and the athleticism of Soviet ballet dancers; and to grasp the engineering and technological achievements underlying Soviet progress in all areas. Soviet authorities wanted visitors to experience first-hand the hospitality of farmers; an abundance produced by industrialised collective farms, and they wanted their guests to gush about the dominance of the Soviet Union in all areas upon home return.¹⁵⁾

Most often, visitors to the Soviet Union were carefully chosen before they even left home; they almost always travelled to the Soviet Union as a part of a group or a delegation; and they followed set itineraries during their stay. Soviet people working with foreign visitors, as guides and interpreters, were also pre-selected and trained in dealing with foreign guests in what was conceived as the “correct manner”. Therefore, all people visiting the Soviet Union, whether as a part of a tourist group or a professional delegation, stepped into a carefully orchestrated script. Foreigners were shown specific model farms and factories and given an idealised (and often unsubstantiated) view of Soviet successes in agriculture, industry, and social welfare.¹⁶⁾ These efforts, often designed to mask poverty, repression, or inefficiency,

14) Orlov and Popov, *See USSR!*

15) Igor B. Orlov and Alexey D. Popov, “‘Show All the Advantages of Socialism’: Foreign Tourism in the USSR and Soviet Management of Visitors’ Impressions”, *Russian Studies in History* 59, no. 3 (2020): 184-225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611983.2021.2014746>.

16) See, e.g., Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, eds., *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and*

are sometimes referred to as Potemkin villages – a term used to imply a carefully curated and misleading representation of reality.¹⁷⁾

Iceland, a small island country in the North Atlantic, is well suited for analysing Soviet place branding and its outcome.¹⁸⁾ Starting in the 1930s, Icelandic communists were in close contact with the Soviet Union and the Comintern.¹⁹⁾ They regularly received promotional materials about the Soviet Union, and they organised several delegations to visit and see the socialist miracle for themselves. In March 1933, the very first issue of the journal *Sovétvinurinn* (e. *Soviet Friend*), published by the Friends of the Soviet Union Society, was mostly dedicated to the selection and planning the first Icelandic delegations to visit the Soviet Union, but the society sent over three delegations of workers in the 1930s.²⁰⁾

In the journal, the Friends of the Soviet Union Society echoed the goals of the host country, claiming that to understand and empathise with the “monumental struggles and sacrifices committed by the Soviet people”²¹⁾ workers needed to go see for themselves. In several articles, written by some of the most prominent Icelandic intellectuals at the time, such as writer Halldór Kiljan Laxness who visited the Soviet Union twice in the 1930s, in 1932 and 1937, the experience of going to the Soviet Union was described in ways reminiscent of spiritual awakenings.²²⁾ Often, this passing “from darkness into light” was described in great detail, as in the words of Sigurður Einarsson, a priest and a social democrat who was on the board of the interwar Friends of the Soviet Union Society:²³⁾ “a country previously mired in darkness and the shadow of death, slavery and ignorance, is about to be electrified, with lights over every village, with electric power lines between rural areas, carrying with them a collective self, mutual help, and cooperation between the people who are there to build a new society.”²⁴⁾ Not surprisingly, the visits of Western intellectuals to the Soviet Union in the 1930s have often been described as a pilgrimage.²⁵⁾

In 1933, the Soviet Union had extended an invitation to the Icelandic Friends of the

Socialism (Cornell University Press, 2006); Shawn Salmon, “Marketing Socialism: Inturist in the Late 1950s and Early 1960s”, in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Cornell University Press, 2006), 186-210, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501727238>; Orlov and Popov, ““Show All the Advantages of Socialism””.

17) Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 16-18.

18) Magnúsdóttir, *Kristinn og Þóra*.

19) Jón Ólafsson, *Kæru félagar: Íslenskir sósíalistar og Sovétríkin, 1920-1960* (Mál og menning, 1999).

20) Skafti Ingimarsson, *Nú blakta rauðir fánar: Saga kommúnista- og sósíalista-hreyfingarinnar á Íslandi, 1918-1968* (Sögufélag, 2024), 133.

21) Kristinn Eyjólfur Andrésson, “Sovétvinafélagið og ísl. alþýða”, *Sovétvinurinn* 1 (Marz 1933): 1.

22) Rósa Magnúsdóttir, “Ekkert venjulegt skemmtiferðalag”: Skilningur og upplifun íslenskra ferðabókahöfunda á Sovétríkjunum”, *Saga: Tímarit Sögufélags* 68, no. 1 (2010): 99-128; Kjartan Ólafsson, *Draumar og veruleiki: Stjórnarmál í endursýn. Um Kommúnistaflokkinn og Sósíalistaflokkinn* (Mál og menning, 2020).

23) Ingimarsson, *Nú blakta rauðir fánar*, 131.

24) Sigurður Einarsson, “Hvað er að sjá?”, *Sovétvinurinn* 1 (Marz 1933): 4-5.

25) Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*; Ólafsson, *Draumar og veruleiki*.

Soviet Union Society to send a five person delegation and in an article entitled “Who Will Go?” it is stated in a very explicit way what kind of an individual the group is looking for: “It is necessary for us to select intelligent and observant people who we can trust, people who will tell us the truth about the situation. Because nothing is more important to us in the fight against capitalism than a correct account of the Soviet organization.” The article finished with an appeal to all workers and fishermen to join the Friends of the Soviet Union Society and then its final words were: “But above all, choose the right men for the delegation.”²⁶⁾ Choosing “the right people” to go and “see the USSR” for themselves was always crucial. This way, the Soviet Union and its allies around the world increased the likelihood of favourable accounts by selecting individuals who were likely to view the Soviet socialist experiment positively.

Branding the Soviet Union as a workers’ paradise was a carefully organised effort, both in the Soviet Union and amongst its most adamant supporters in foreign countries. The Icelandic case is representative of several other Western countries, where intellectuals worked hard to educate local workers about the successes of the brand-new workers’ state.²⁷⁾ Making sure that most of the people who visited the Soviet Union would be inclined to see the place “correctly” already gave them an advantage in terms of branding the country and it allowed for a lasting impact of the visit in terms of these visitors spreading the word in their relative home countries about their experiences in the socialist paradise.

The Friends of the Soviet Union Society in Iceland did not survive the Second World War, but in the postwar period, a new friendship society was established, with the help of the new Soviet Embassy in Iceland. The Soviet-Icelandic Friendship Society (is. *Menningartengsl Íslands og Ráðstjórnarríkjanna*) was established in 1950 and became known under its Icelandic acronym, MÍR, which in Russian means both peace, world, and village. MÍR continued to organise Icelandic people’s visits to the Soviet Union in the 1950s. As previously in the 1930s the visits were considered the best possible way to introduce people to the Soviet Union; especially to show people that the USSR was not a closed country and to correct people’s “misbeliefs” about socialism.²⁸⁾

Generally, people in Iceland were sceptical though, and MÍR often complained that many were afraid to accept an invitation to go see the USSR. People feared that they would be associated with communism and perhaps even lose their jobs if they went on these trips, which resulted in mostly devoted communists visiting from Iceland. This was a vicious cycle: the Soviet Union (and their loyal friends in MÍR) wanted a broad group of people to come

26) Gunnar Jónsson, “Hverjir fara?”, *Sóvétvinurinn* 1 (Marz 1933): 5.

27) Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (University of California Press, 1992); Herbert R. Lottman, *The Left Bank: Writers, Artists, and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

28) Magnúsdóttir, “Ekkert venjulegt skemmtiferðalag”; Magnúsdóttir, *Kristinn og Þóra*.

visit so that they could be convinced of the superiority of the socialist state, but (in most cases) only devoted socialists were fearless enough to go.²⁹⁾

Still, in a small and isolated society such as Iceland, these visits and the resulting discussions about them upon return, received much interest in Icelandic society. Several people published articles in newspapers and magazines and/or gave public lectures about their experiences; few also wrote books.³⁰⁾ The following analysis relies on various accounts to cast light on how the branding of socialist modernity was executed and received in Iceland in the 1930s until the 1960s.

Gender Equality: The Celebration of the Accomplishments of Soviet Women

The Soviet Union actively promoted the image of itself as a champion of women's rights and gender equality, particularly in the realm of labour. From the early years of the Bolshevik regime, women were encouraged to enter the workforce as a vital part of building socialism. While Soviet propaganda celebrated the female tractor driver, the factory worker, the engineer, and the scientist as symbols of progress and emancipation,³¹⁾ legal reforms granted women the right to vote, access to education, maternity leave, and state-supported childcare, all of which were framed as evidence of the USSR's superiority over capitalist societies.³²⁾ Posters, films, and literature often depicted women as both productive workers and devoted mothers, embodying the ideal of the "New Soviet Woman". While these policies certainly did not always translate into full equality in practice, they played a crucial role in shaping the Soviet Union's international image as a society where women were empowered and essential to the national development.³³⁾

In some ways, the branding of the Soviet Union as a model place for women's rights was successful. Its focus on institutional structures, such as childcare and communal kitchens that supported and valued women's rights were promoted in visual propaganda and in many countries, including Iceland, radical women looked admiringly to the advances women had seemingly made in the Soviet Union and adopted many of its principles to their local and national struggles for increased rights.³⁴⁾ Gender equality was a key branding issue for the

29) Magnúsdóttir, *Kristinn og Þóra*.

30) Magnúsdóttir, "“Ekkert venjulegt skemmtiferðalag””.

31) Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press, 1997).

32) Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

33) Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922-53* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Melanie Ilic, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Alexis Peri, "New Soviet Woman: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad", *The Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (2018): 621-644, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12202>.

34) Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, and Þorgerður Þorvaldsdóttir, *Konur sem*

Soviet Union and in addition to women participating in professional and other delegations to see the socialist state, it was common to organise special women's delegations where the goal was to illustrate both the support the socialist structures provided for women, and the perceived independence and freedom of the Soviet working woman.³⁵⁾

Needless to say, the reality of the lives of Soviet female workers often fell short of the image promoted, but radical women who visited, like Þóra Vigfúsdóttir in 1954, drew their conclusions about the socialist women's paradise based on what they were shown – and what they wanted to see. For example, Þóra commented on the appearance of Soviet women who walked in downtown Moscow dressed in pants and overalls, indicating their participation in the socialist labour market and drew her (often predesigned) conclusions about the Soviet Union as a place that valued women as equal to men.³⁶⁾

Þóra Vigfúsdóttir had been to the Soviet Union three times before the abovementioned trip. She was married to Kristinn E. Andrússon, who ran the cultural propaganda mission for the Soviet Union in Iceland, from the 1930s until the early 1970s, and they had many opportunities to visit the Eastern Bloc.³⁷⁾ Their visits were both as parts of delegations and personal restorative stays in sanatoriums and Black Sea sanctuaries. She was therefore privileged in the sense that she visited the USSR several times over a long period – and because of their status and loyalty, Kristinn and Þóra were always greeted with a red carpet treatment, meaning that their stays in the Soviet Union were paid for in full and quite comfortable. They were both devoted communist (even Stalinists) and their belief in the superiority of Soviet modernity over the capitalist alternative was never shaken.³⁸⁾

Trips to the Soviet Union were often planned on short notice and in 1951, Þóra and her husband received an invitation to observe the May 1 celebrations in Moscow five days before the scheduled departure. The Soviet Union often extended invitations to delegations around days such as the International Workers' Day on May 1 and the Anniversary of the October Revolution on November 7, which provided excellent opportunities to show off their accomplishments with elaborate parades and events. This particular trip was organised by VOKS and entailed a delegation of seven. First, the itinerary took them to Moscow for five days, then to Tbilisi in Georgia for five days before returning to Moscow again.³⁹⁾

The Icelandic delegation was there as one of many other international delegations

kjósa: Aldarsaga (Sögufélag, 2020).

35) Diana Cucuz, *Winning Women's Hearts and Minds: Selling Cold War Culture in the US and the USSR* (University of Toronto Press, 2023).

36) Þóra Vigfúsdóttir, "Diary of Þóra Vigfúsdóttir, July 15, 1954", National and University Library of Iceland (NULI), Lbs. 25 NF, Box 29.

37) Magnúsdóttir, *Kristinn og Þóra*.

38) Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One*.

39) Magnúsdóttir, *Kristinn og Þóra*.

celebrating International Workers' Day, with representatives from the other four Nordic countries, England, France, the Netherlands, the US and Canada. After a few successful days in Moscow, the Icelandic delegation embarked on a long flight to Tbilisi, with two layovers in Ukraine, and according to Þóra Vigfúsdóttir, "there was a lot to see, and we really had to stay alert."⁴⁰ Upon return, Þóra gave an account of the trip on the Icelandic national radio and then published a written version of it in the Icelandic socialist women's magazine *Melkorka*, which was devoted to radical women's voices, publishing both articles by Icelandic women and international authors in translation.

Þóra gave a detailed account of what they had been shown in Tbilisi and Georgia, including magnificent museums, schools, daycares, and factories. But most of her observations were about the incredible lives of Soviet socialist women: "As we know, for the past 33 years, women in the Soviet Union have had equal rights with men; equal pay for equal work; equal access to education, and the same opportunities for personal development." She continued reciting numbers about the incredible advancements of Soviet women: "Forty thousand women work in science, as professors and assistant teacher, in higher education. Fifteen thousand women are engine drivers, and close to two hundred thousand women are doctors and seventy thousand engineers in the Soviet Union. Many women are mayors and directors in state and municipal organizations, and 280 women are part of the bodies of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union."⁴¹

Clearly, Þóra was parroting numbers that had been presented to the delegation by local Soviet guides, who also showed the delegation a "modern nylon factory, bright and cosy".⁴² The delegation spent the better part of the day there, looking at the factory and the surroundings. About eighty percent of the staff were women of all age who worked seven or eight hours a day. In the Soviet Union, they were told, overtime was banned by law, and the staff had access to a theatre, with a stage for setting up productions and a screen for movies, that seated 600 people.

The factory librarian met with them and told them that that they also ran an evening school where the "working girls could prepare for vocational training, even higher education, with teaching and teaching materials provided to them at no cost." The good life of Soviet women workers had seemingly no limits: they had access to a well-equipped gym, a large dining hall, and daycare – and after twenty years with the same factory, women could look forward to an early retirement.⁴³ This emphasis on both work and leisure was also an illustration of the way the socialist state promoted "acceptable" physical and mental training

40) Vigfúsdóttir, "Á fjarlægum slóðum", 18.

41) Ibid.

42) Ibid.

43) Þóra Vigfúsdóttir, "Á fjarlægum slóðum", *Melkorka* 8, no. 1 (1952): 28.

in order to support the evolution of the “New Soviet Man”.⁴⁴⁾

Póra’s writings are illustrative of the way Soviet propaganda and place branding about women worked in practice. People were shown model factories and given endless “proof” of how the lives of Soviet female workers were exemplary. Póra also understood her part in the Soviet propaganda machine and upon return her experience of the Soviet Union was both broadcast on the state radio station and printed in the socialist women’s journal. This is but one example of these kinds of writings – Icelandic women often wrote about their meeting with Soviet women and experiencing their seemingly superior conditions in the Soviet Union, often with a cry for continuing the battle at home.⁴⁵⁾

This process created a feedback loop in which perception and projection were mutually reinforcing. Positive accounts by sympathetic visitors strengthened the credibility of Soviet claims abroad, while scepticism or criticism exposed the limits of narrative control. The Icelandic case illustrates how this system relied not only on top-down communication but also on transnational intermediaries whose interpretations shaped the ultimate impact of Soviet branding efforts.

Cultural (and Athletic) Superiority: Soviet Culturedness (*kul’turnost*)

The Soviet Union also branded itself as a place where people had equal access to education and where talent was nurtured and promoted. From the early days of Bolshevik rule, they emphasised increasing literacy rates and providing equal access to education. And in the 1930s, as a part of the Stalin revolution, an idea of “culturedness” (*kul’turnost*) was promoted to support the development of “the new Soviet man”. According to the authorities, a cultured Soviet citizen was literate, politically conscious, and engaged in the collective life of the nation. This Soviet “culturedness” became an integrated value in socialist life, encompassing not only artistic appreciation, but also moral behaviour, civic responsibility, and an ideological commitment to socialism.⁴⁶⁾

In 1932, Stalin had claimed that writers were the “engineers of the human soul” and therefore elevated the written word and by association, the arts, to having a vital role in the development of Soviet socialism.⁴⁷⁾ As a part of this, the Soviet Union invested heavily in cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, concert halls, and theatres and promoted classical

44) Koenker, *Club Red*.

45) Magnúsdóttir, “‘Ekkert venjulegt skemmtiferðalag’”.

46) Vadim Volkov, “The Concept of *kul’turnost*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process”, in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Routledge, 2000), 210-230.

47) Frank Westerman, *Engineers of the Soul: The Grandiose Propaganda of Stalin’s Russia*, trans. Sam Garrett (Overlook Press, 2002).

music, ballet, and literature as art forms that should be accessible to all to enjoy and to cultivate. It emphasised high culture, which was believed to elevate the masses, instill discipline, and reinforce socialist values.⁴⁸⁾

Domestically, the flip side of this was the amount of social control that accompanied this goal. But internationally, this image of a literate and highly cultured people was celebrated among leftist intellectuals who often recounted this as evidence of the speedy progress resulting from socialist policies.⁴⁹⁾ Iceland was no exception, and among the very first people who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s, were some of the country's most prominent writers, such as Halldór Kiljan Laxness and Þórbergur Þórðarson.⁵⁰⁾

The interwar years were a time of much fascination with the Soviet project, and Icelandic intellectuals, like their peers in Western Europe, often commented on the availability of culture and people's familiarity with literature and classical music in the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, this side of the Soviet Union was often presented in thick literary journals, such as the Icelandic *Rauðir pennar* and later *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, which published articles by famous Soviet and socialist authors in translation, in addition to the writings of Icelandic writers and intellectuals.

In the 1930s, articles often focussed on the state provided opportunities for Soviet workers to attend concerts, the theatre, and see films.⁵¹⁾ After the Second World War, the onset of the Cold War and the ensuing cultural competition renewed and changed the promotion of Soviet culture internationally. Positioned specifically against American (i.e., capitalist) culture, the Soviets now contrasted the presumed "culturedness" of Soviet people with what they painted as the uncultured popular and low-brow culture of the United States of America.

Visitors to the Soviet Union in the 1950s, when the cultural Cold War reached its peak, were taken to various museums and attended theatres, ballet recitals, and concerts almost every night. Almost invariably, visitors were impressed with the high standards of Soviet cultural performances – and for Icelandic people, visiting monumental buildings such as the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, was an unforgettable experience. Much was made of the cultural infrastructure around the enormous territory of the Soviet empire – how it was accessible by everyone and how participation in cultural activities was encouraged.

One of the characteristics of the cultural Cold War, was the increase in performances by Soviet artists around the world. As most people did not get to go visit the Soviet Union and

48) Cate, *The Dancer Defects*.

49) Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*; Ólafsson, *Draumar og veruleiki*.

50) Magnúsdóttir, "Ekkert venjulegt skemmtiferðalag".

51) "Stalin-skurðurinn", *Sóvétvinurinn* 5 (sept.–okt. 1934): 9.

attend their concert halls, bringing world class ballet dancers, opera singers, and violin players to people's hometowns was a clever way to present the advances of the Soviet Union, which people could enjoy without the costly travel. Located right in between Moscow and Washington, Iceland received multiple Soviet delegations during the Cold War. Iceland was a founding member of NATO, but the Socialist Party did relatively well in elections and therefore, both the superpowers devoted considerable effort trying to impact the public opinion by presenting their superiority in the cultural arena.⁵²⁾

In the early 1950s, Icelandic communists claimed at the annual meeting of MÍR, the Soviet-Icelandic Friendship Society that “the best weapon against the United States is intimate knowledge of the Soviet people and their talents on all fields.”⁵³⁾ The goal of MÍR was to show the cultural superiority of communism and in addition to film showings and exhibits around the country, they received the visits of celebrated Soviet artists and writers. Especially classical musicians and ballet dancers were considered the best possible weapons in the fight for cultural superiority and socialists emphasised the value of these events in their publications.

In 1955, the socialist newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* devoted a full page to recent concerts and ballet performances by Soviet guests. It emphasised the supportive environment for artists in the Soviet Union, for example, with a statement about how “every human being in the Soviet Union learns complex and difficult folk dances, including classical dance taught in daycare, cultural clubs, youth clubs, and in school; a culture of dance is broadly nurtured.” The article also emphasised that “many things contribute to the perfection of the dance form in the east, and a not so insignificant factor is the fact that this noble art form is not only a specialty of a chosen few, but nurtured at the collective level.”⁵⁴⁾

The Soviet emphasis on *kul'turnost'* and a cultivated, disciplined, and ideologically committed citizen was not merely a domestic project but a strategic tool in the international arena. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union projected an image of refinement and progress, contrasting sharply with the perceived superficiality of Western popular culture. Icelandic intellectuals and socialists, captivated by this vision, thus became active participants in the cultural Cold War, both as visitors to the Soviet Union and hosts of Soviet artists.

The widespread admiration for Soviet artistic excellence, especially in music and dance, reinforced the narrative of Soviet socialist society as a place where culture was not a privilege but a collective achievement. In this way, Soviet cultural superiority became both a symbol and a weapon – and an embodiment of socialist ideals and a persuasive argument in the global

52) Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins*.

53) Kristinn Eyjólfur Andrésson, “Ræða KEA á fyrsta ársþingi MÍR 1951”, National and University Library of Iceland (NULI), Lbs. 25 NF, Box 61.

54) “Tónleikar og listdans sovétzka gesta”, *Þjóðviljinn*, October 27, 1955, 7.

ideological contest.

Technological Achievements: Space and Sputnik

The launch of Sputnik in 1957 was a watershed moment in the Cold War. It stunned the West and signalled Soviet dominance in space exploration – a field that symbolised technological and intellectual prowess. This achievement was not only scientific but deeply cultural, reinforcing the earlier narrative that socialism fostered innovation and excellence.⁵⁵⁾ The success of Sputnik came at a good time for the Soviet Union. In February 1956, Khrushchev had delivered his infamous secret speech criticising the idealisation of Stalin, and three days before the anniversary of the October Revolution in November 1956, the Soviets invaded Hungary and crushed the uprising there by force. Both of these events provoked strong reactions around the world and created a serious backlash for Soviet place branding.

In 1957, it was clear that the conditions for Soviet cultural activities had drastically changed in countries such as Iceland – not only because of the secret speech and Hungary, but also due to the momentum gained by the operations of the United States Information Service, which had stepped up its activities.⁵⁶⁾ At the same time, however, a new dimension emerged in the superpower rivalry, which caused the Soviets' self-confidence to grow in direct proportion to the dismay of Americans when on October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union became the first to launch an artificial satellite into space as Sputnik I began its orbit around the Earth.

As mentioned earlier, the Soviet Union used important days such as May 1 to showcase their superiority with military parades and elaborate celebrations. One of these days was November 7, the anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution, which in 1956 was outshined by the brutal invasion of Hungary. The timing of the Sputnik launch was therefore no coincidence – it was cleverly scheduled so that it would be possible to link this major technological achievement to the revolution, claiming that this step had demonstrated and proven “the superiority of the society that in forty years has lifted its peoples from utter misery and humiliation to the highest ranks of science and culture”.⁵⁷⁾ Ordinary Americans were deeply shaken by the news and began to question the quality of science and technology education in their own country, as this Soviet achievement was rightly interpreted to their advantage in the propaganda war taking place between the superpowers at the time.⁵⁸⁾ This

55) Tarana Jafarova and Aytan Aliyeva, “The Cold War Battlefield: A Comparative Analysis of International Education Strategies between the United States and the Soviet Union”, *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): 1-12, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1431315>.

56) Haukur Ingvarsson, *Fulltrúi þess besta í bandarískri menningu: Orðspor Williams Faulkners í íslensku menningarlífi 1930-1960* (Sögufélag, 2021).

57) “Hálfrar aldar byltingarafmæli haldið á tunglinu?”, *Morgunblaðið*, November 6, 1957, 1.

58) Teasel Muir-Harmony, “The Space Race and American Foreign Relations”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (2017).

ultimately enabled the Soviet Union to celebrate the forty-year anniversary of the October revolution in 1957 in grand style around the globe.

It was generally believed that this example of the technological superiority of the Soviet Union had created favourable conditions for the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution and in Iceland the socialist newspaper wrote that it had “undermined the imagined superiority of American technology and science.”⁵⁹⁾ The timing of the Sputnik adventure was no coincidence; especially the launch of Sputnik II, carrying the dog Laika on November 3, 1957. It was timed so that these technological marvels could be directly associated with the achievements of the revolution on its 40th anniversary on November 7, 1957.⁶⁰⁾

During the Khrushchev era, the utopian visions of the socialist future gained new momentum through technological victories, particularly in space science. Optimism was so great that participants in the fortieth anniversary celebrations in Moscow were told that, with continued Soviet success, “the Russians could easily celebrate the 50th anniversary of the revolution on the Moon.”⁶¹⁾ This, of course, did not happen and the 51 year celebration was, once again, celebrated in the shadow of another Soviet invasion – this time the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 – that severely damaged their reputation around the world.

In 1957, however, there was no doubt that the Soviets had won a major victory in the superpower struggle for superiority, and the world was reminded of this with a massive military parade on Red Square on November 7. The anniversary of the revolution was always different from other celebrations related to socialism around the world, such as the May 1st festivities, in that the focus was on the Soviet Union itself and its foundational myth – i.e., the October Revolution. On its 40th anniversary, the Soviets were in the midst of an international propaganda campaign aimed at repairing the damage they had caused to public opinion the previous year. The celebrations reflected this effort worldwide – including in Iceland, where the Soviet Union’s success in space science was believed to have had a positive impact on public opinion around the world.

Beyond its immediate propaganda value for the Soviet Union, Sputnik also illustrates how technological achievement functioned as a form of symbolic capital in the cultural Cold War. The satellite was not only a demonstration of scientific capability but a powerful display of Soviet modernity on a global scale, with the power to transform an otherwise distant ideological system into something tangible and inspiring.

In this sense, space technology bridged the gap between ideology and perception, allowing

59) “Ófremdarástandi í skólamálum kennt um ósigur Bandaríkjanna”, *Þjóðviljinn*, November 7, 1957, 1.

60) Roger D. Launius, John M. Logsdon, and Robert W. Smith, eds., *Reconsidering Sputnik: Forty Years Since the Soviet Satellite*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203783382>.

61) “Hálfrar aldar byltingarafmæli”, 1.

the Soviet Union to convert technical success into cultural and political legitimacy. Crucially, this process relied on interpretation as much as innovation; the meaning of Sputnik was actively constructed through media narratives, public celebrations, and diplomatic messaging. Thus, the significance of Sputnik lay not simply in orbiting the Earth, but in how it reshaped global hierarchies of knowledge, progress, and modernity – temporarily destabilising Western assumptions of superiority and reinforcing the Soviet claim that socialism could produce not only equality but excellence on a world-historical stage.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union's branding of socialist modernity was a multifaceted and ideologically driven campaign that combined gender equality, cultural superiority, and technological achievement into a coherent narrative of progress. These efforts were not merely symbolic; they were strategically designed to appeal to both domestic and international audiences, with carefully orchestrated visits, exhibitions, and propaganda materials that showcased the USSR as a viable and superior alternative to Western capitalism.

The goal of this article was to recapitulate the major themes in Soviet place branding efforts, but there are many more ways to cast light on the development of illiberal place branding in the twentieth century. Events like the 1957 World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow exemplified how the Soviet Union used such international platforms to promote its values, blending cultural diplomacy with ideological messaging and has been compared to contemporary Russian strategies for hosting mega-events as tools of soft power and ideological projection.⁶²⁾

What ultimately distinguishes Soviet place branding from liberal models is not only its ideological content but its structural logic. Whereas liberal place branding typically operates through market competition, audience segmentation, and relatively decentralised image production, the Soviet model was centrally controlled, intentionally pedagogical, and embedded in a broader ideological project. Rather than appealing to consumer preferences, it sought to reshape them by presenting socialism as a superior modernity. The Soviet case therefore highlights how place branding can function not merely as a tool of attraction, but as an instrument of systemic rivalry and ideological persuasion.

When visiting the Soviet Union, delegations from countries like Iceland were exposed to curated experiences that highlighted the supposed successes of socialism – from empowered women in the workforce to world-class ballet performances and groundbreaking space achievements.

62) Pia Koivunen, *Performing Peace and Friendship: The World Youth Festivals and Soviet Cultural Diplomacy* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110761160>; Velikaya, "Soviet Public Diplomacy".

These encounters often left a lasting impression, reinforcing the Soviet narrative among sympathetic intellectuals and activists abroad.

Yet, beneath the surface of these polished presentations lay a system of strict control and censorship, which ensured that only the most favourable images of Soviet life were disseminated.⁶³⁾ The branding of Soviet socialism was not market-driven but centrally controlled, reflecting the priorities of an illiberal regime that used propaganda as a tool of both persuasion and repression. The contrast with liberal place branding is stark: while capitalist democracies often rely on consumer appeal and soft power, the Soviet model was rooted in ideological conviction and state orchestration.

In Iceland, as elsewhere, the impact of Soviet branding was mixed. While many visitors were deeply impressed by what they saw, others remained sceptical, aware of the performative nature of their experiences. Still, the Soviet Union succeeded in shaping perceptions and sparking debates about modernity, equality, and progress in countries around the world, not just in Iceland. Even if illiberal place branding strategies in the Russian Federation are beyond the scope of the article, casting light on the history of Soviet place branding initiatives as well as the enduring mechanisms through which illiberal states shape global perceptions should offer critical insights into contemporary geopolitical branding.

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