

Pavel RATMANOV¹, Polina SHENOIEVA²

The USSR in the International Hygienic Exhibition in Dresden in 1930: Healthcare as “Soft Power”

This paper aims to study the participation of the USSR in the 1930 International Hygienic Exhibition in Dresden (preparation of the Soviet pavilion and the work of the exhibition) in the context of Soviet and German history, as well as the perception of the Soviet exposition by the German press and evaluation of the display by Soviet officials. The study is based on archival materials from the fund of People’s Commissariat of Health of the RSFSR in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF, F. A482): correspondence of the People’s Commissariat of Health regarding the preparation and conduct of the exhibition, orders, minutes of meetings, reports, clippings from the German press.

Organizers of the exhibition in Dresden conceived it as a cultural and scientific event. The aim was not to cover the entire healthcare industry but to emphasize hygiene, especially personal hygiene, and physical education. However, already in June 1929, the People’s Commissariat of Health of the RSFSR planned the participation at the International Hygienic Exhibition in Dresden in 1930 as “a demonstration of the success of socialist construction in the years after October and a grandiose sweep of the five-year plan,” which should “play a huge political role and have a serious impact not only on the proletarian masses but also to the radical circles of the intelligentsia in the West.”

Preparation of the Soviet pavilion carried on against the background of the change in leadership and policy of the People’s Commissariat of Health of the RSFSR, but the dismissal of N.A. Semashko and the appointment of M.F. Vladimirov as People’s Commissar did not have a noticeable effect on the ideological content of the Soviet exposition.

The prominent Soviet artist, designer, and architect Lazar Lissitzky (El Lissitzky) was appointed artistic director of the Soviet pavilion at the Exhibition in Dresden. Deputy Director of State Institute of Social Hygiene I. D. Strashun was a Director of the Soviet pavilion.

The 1930 International Hygienic Exhibition in Dresden exposed the difference in the political and scientific agendas of different countries. If Germany organized an exhibition to demonstrate its scientific and technological superiority in the field of hygiene, the USSR used hygiene only as an instrument of political propaganda in the international arena.

German press praised the artistic design of the Soviet pavilion, noting the role of Lazar Lissitzky. At the same time, German newspaper observers did not

believe the charts of mortality and morbidity rates in the USSR and concluded that the USSR demonstrated non-existent achievements. Recent historical studies confirm these suspicions.

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¹ *Far Eastern State Medical University;*

² *Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz in Gernersheim*

pavel.ratmanov@mail.fesmu.ru