



JUKKA GRONOW AND SERGEY ZHURAVLEV

Fashion Meets Socialism

Fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War

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Jukka Gronow and Sergey Zjuravlev

1. Introduction

Fashion and Soviet modernity

Fashion and design would, in the West, commonly be seen as antithetical to the values of Soviet society. Awareness was, and is, high in relation to the accomplishments of the Soviet Union in the area of scientific progress in the late 1950s and early 1960s and even the leading powers in the West looked on sputniks and cosmonauts with envy and admiration. At that time overall economic growth in the USSR was quite impressive, and its leaders' pompous statements about overcoming the production levels of the USA in many basic industrial products and food-stuffs did not seem at all farfetched. What was less generally known however was that, during this period, the Soviet Union made major investments in fashion design. Promoting fashion and improving the standards of clothing was as important as the general politics of material culture in the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union has certainly never enjoyed a high reputation in the world of fashion. The standardized, industrially mass-produced clothes were held in low esteem by both Soviet consumers and foreign visitors. If anything, Soviet citizens were generally dissatisfied with the domestic supply of clothing. To foreign visitors, street fashion in Moscow, not to mention smaller provincial towns or the countryside, looked rather dull, uniform and grey. Interestingly at this time, the Soviet Union had one of the world's largest organizations of fashion design, all planned, financed and supported by the state. Thousands of professional, well-educated designers worked in the various Soviet institutions of fashion. They designed according to the annual plan thousands of new fashionable garments and accessories both for industrial mass production and for smaller fashion ateliers that sewed custom made clothes for their customers.

By the early 1960s, these institutions of fashion design had many accomplishments to be proud of. They promoted Soviet fashion by increasing the variety of industrially produced clothing as well as with their spectacular fashion shows, which were well received both at home and abroad. Thus, Soviet fashion contributed to the Soviet effort to nurture peaceful competition between the two world systems, socialism and capitalism. It became obvious during the 1970s that, in the end not even fashion and fashion design,

despite at times almost heroic efforts, could overcome the economic and bureaucratic limitations and inherent rigidity of the planned economy.

This book is the story of the emergence and establishment of the post-war Soviet culture of dress, the great expectations attached to it, its great achievements and the limitations that prevented it from revolutionizing the Soviet style of dress and culture of consumption in general. The reasons for the discrepancy between the 'input' and 'output' in the Soviet system of fashion provide an intriguing question to which we shall devote much attention in what follows. The serious shortages, issues of quality and limited variety of items regularly on sale in the Soviet shops were problems that plagued not only the fashion industry in the USSR but the production of consumer goods in general.¹ However, these problems probably beleaguered the clothes industry to a greater extent than other fields of consumption. The rapid, seasonal changes of fashion just did not fit into the planned economy.

Since the collapse of Communism historians have discussed to what extent the Eastern European socialist societies were modern. On the one hand, the 'modernists' like Stephen Kotkin, the author of the famous work *Magnetic Mountain*,² have emphasized that the building of socialism in the 1920s and 1930s shared many of the tendencies and aspirations essential to the project of modernity such as economic and scientific progress, urbanization, etc. On the other hand, the 'Neo-Traditionalists,' such as Sheila Fitzpatrick,³ have repeatedly pointed out that despite some of its seemingly modern features, the Soviet Union was more traditional than modern. She emphasizes for example the role of clientism and the importance of ascribed social statuses, both ethnic and professional, as well as the privileges and corruption following from them. The answer to the question undoubtedly depends on what one means by a modern society or modernity. One should distinguish on the one hand the process of modernization typically associated with social and economic progress based on the strong belief in science and progress and on the other hand the experience of modernity, closely associated with the individualization and detraditionalization of the society, which received its expression in the various forms of modern art at the turn of the 20th century. Michael David-Fox,⁴ commenting on the dispute between the modernists and the traditionalists, suggested that we should pay more attention to the concrete forms of cultural transfer between the capitalist West and the socialist East and to the various ways in which they were adapted and modified in their countries of destination.

In this book, we shall follow his suggestion by describing and analyzing one specific, important field of Soviet consumption: garment fashion. The above mentioned authors have mainly studied the pre-war years, which could be called the first peak of modernization. The second peak in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with de-Stalinization, Khrushchev's years in power. The second period has however so far received much less attention from historians of the Soviet Union than the pre-war period. Both periods were characterized by rapid industrial and technological progress as well as rapid urbanization. The Communist Party and the Soviet government also had a cultural mission, and the authorities made great efforts to educate the population in order to create a new cultured person better able to meet

the new demands of urban and industrial life. The establishment of the Soviet fashion institutions and the pro good taste propaganda in which they engaged was an integral part of the process of modernization led from above. The Soviet authorities thought rational and scientific economic planning inherent to socialism, would inevitably lead to the greater material abundance and human wellbeing as well as to the general beautification of human life. Progress in beauty would take place parallel to technical progress as an integral part of a modern socialist society.

If we are to believe Georg Simmel, the great sociologist of modernity, fashion, with its rapid and almost constant changes is perhaps more key to our experience of modernity than anything else.⁵ Fashion is always fleeting, rapidly changing, almost ineffable. It is also arbitrary: there is no fundamental reason why something should be in fashion other than the very fact that it is in fashion and is so as a result of appealing to people's taste at that moment.

As Simmel suggested, fashion can be compared to Charles Baudelaire's modern artist whose task it was to catch the moment of eternity in a world that was in a permanent flux without any steady focus point. Fashion had the honor of standing for the fundamental experience of ambivalence which in Simmel's opinion was typical of modern society in general. The very moment something became fashionable and popular among the mass of the population it disappeared and gave way to something else equally fashionable and novel.

Despite its seeming frivolousness fashion was to Simmel an extremely important social phenomenon worthy of the serious attention of the social scientist. In his interpretation it had an important social and cultural function – fashion could teach people in a relatively harmless way, and without giving rise to too much anxiety, how to live in a 'modern' world in which nothing was stable or taken for granted. Simmel claimed that fashion satisfies two basic human drives which are both equally strong, seemingly contradictory and operate simultaneously. The first is the drive to *identify* with others by imitating them as closely as possible and the second is the drive to *distinguish* ourselves from others and it thus emphasized our own taste and individuality. The distinctions can be large or small and sometimes they are almost unnoticeable to those who are not real connoisseurs of the relevant matters of taste.⁶

As we will see, fashion with its search for novelties for the novelty's sake and eternally repeated fashion cycles, caused quite a lot of anxiety among common Soviet people and worried the authorities almost continuously. It was quite difficult to see any real progress in the eternally changing fashion. Fashion was definitely not meant to be the primary social mechanism of collective identification in a socialist society where the expressions of one's individuality were expected to be directed to other areas of social life. In Russian just as in many other European languages, the word fashion usually refers to clothing. We talk about fashionable clothing referring both to its novelty and attractiveness.⁷ More generally fashion refers to the cyclical stylistic changes in almost any social and cultural phenomenon, discernible particularly in most fields of consumer goods. As a social form, fashion is

a matter of pure taste.⁸ It is always presented and experienced as something new and gets its special value and appeal from the very novelty which makes it desirable. Fashion in dress often stands for fashion in general for good reason, since the transformation of fashion with its regular seasonal cycles was institutionalized early in the history of European clothes manufacturing and trade. Simmel suggested that in order to decide whether it is possible to identify similar cyclical-slower or faster-changes in other fields of culture or consumption we should ask ourselves if things could just as well be otherwise. What is in fashion at any one time is arbitrary. The inspiration for fashionable designs or collections can sometimes come from some important historical events or parallel developments in other fields of art or culture. Fashion is a *Zeitgeist* phenomenon and as such it has no other reason for existence than its immediate appeal to the taste of those concerned, both fashion designers and customers.

Fashion in a centrally planned economy

The ideal of rapid economic, social and cultural change and progress was a central part of the doctrine of building socialism in the Soviet Union. The centrally planned economy aimed at modernizing the foundations of the whole society as quickly as possible. This rapid and continuous social change would not cease until the final stage of social development, communism, had been reached. Soviet citizens were therefore expected to adjust to this process of change which would create the conditions for a higher form of society. They were also expected to adapt to a new way of life that would fit into these new social conditions. This had serious consequences for the everyday behavior of ordinary people. The Soviet ideologists faced the important task of educating their fellow citizens in proper socialist manners and etiquette as well as higher standards of cultivated taste. It is understandable, that the dress code and the standards of sartorial taste were very important in this respect, clothes are, after all, the most visible exterior sign that ordinary people use in deciphering and interpreting the social status of their fellow citizens. Many Soviet citizens had quite recently moved from Russian villages, with traditional modes of behavior and values, to the new urban and industrial centers which presented quite new social demands. Instead of their close village neighbors and relatives they had to deal every day with numerous anonymous others. Because of its extremely rapid growth David Hoffmann⁹ called Moscow in the 1930s a peasant metropolis. Soviet urbanization continued intensively even in the 1950s and 1960s.

To the Soviet mind, modernization was closely connected to progress, which could best be promoted by rational planning and scientific-technical developments. In this respect it was antithetical to almost everything that the social phenomenon of fashion, with its contingent and irrational nature, represented. The Soviet authorities and ideologists, however, soon found through experience that they had to pay attention to fashion in planning clothing production and distribution. They thought that it was something that women in particular could not live without even under socialism. It

was also an important part of the Soviet post-war peaceful competition with the West which had a strong legitimating function inside the country. Fashionable clothing came as if into the bargain with other technical innovations that were considered progressive and copied from the West.

Fashion was like a natural force that the socialist planning agencies could not avoid and had to take into account in their calculations even if they would rather have forgotten about it altogether. Fashion brought a complicating element of unpredictability to both their annual and long-term plans. Despite repeated efforts they could not regulate fashion effectively, but instead had to try to learn how to live with it. Most often fashion was legitimated simply by the fact that it existed. Some Soviet theorists argued that in the same way in which there is progress in science and technology there is a progress of beauty in fashion. But even they had to acknowledge that this analogy did not really work. Last year's fashion was not necessarily less beautiful than this year's. It was rejected simply because it was not in fashion any more.

One can, with good reason, wonder to what extent the fashion of to-day is really in any way a genuine expression of the customers' taste. How much real choice does a customer have in markets dominated by a couple of big producers and trade chains with their own trademarks which they promote aggressively through worldwide marketing and advertising? The alternatives on offer in the Soviet clothing shops and ateliers were often admittedly even more restricted leaving the customers the choice of either buying whatever was available, regardless of whether they liked it or not, or to buy nothing in which case they could sew their own clothes or rely on the services of private tailors.

We shall describe both the establishment of the major social institutions and organizations of fashion and the development of the professional aesthetic and moral discourse around it as well as analyzed the etiquette which regulated and guided the ordinary Soviet men and women in their everyday relations with these institutions.

The Soviet authorities copied, often quite openly and without reservations, but always selectively, many of the basic social institutions and organizations from what they thought to be the most advanced countries in the West. This process started in Stalin's time and continued long into the Brezhnev era. In fashion, Paris haute couture and Christian Dior in particular acted as the absolute points of excellence.¹⁰ Their status remained largely unthreatened even though such 'harmful' Western influences were the target of political campaigns from time to time. Fashion was, however, by no means the only area of consumption where Western models played an important role, the most popular Soviet private cars produced on a mass scale, like Volga, Zhiguli and Moskvich, originated in the West too and had German, American or Italian cars as their models.¹¹ In culinary culture it is not as easy to name any such specific influences, but it is quite clear that French and continental 'haute cuisine' were the main sources of inspiration for the Soviet specialists, even though at the same time American fast food and snack bars (*Amerikanki*) also played a role.¹² Because Soviet luxury was ideally there for the people, everything was mass produced in millions of copies and available to all from the very start.

The founding of the Soviet Houses of Fashion

At the beginning of 1944, while the Second World War was still being fought on all fronts, the Soviet government and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided to open the House of Fashion Design of Clothes in Moscow (*Moskovskii dom modelei odezhdy*).¹³ Soon after the war, several similar fashion houses were founded in the capitals of the Soviet Republics and other big cities of the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1960s, their number had reached almost twenty. The Moscow House of Fashion Design of Clothes became the All-Union House of Fashion Design of Clothes in Moscow (*Obshchesoyuznyi dom modelei odezhdy*), that is, the central and leading fashion house in the country, soon after its founding in 1948. These fashion houses were by no means the only ones, with leather wear, shoes and knitwear all having their own specialized houses of fashion design from the 1960s onward as well as the majority of big department stores having their own ateliers and design units. The flagship of Soviet department stores, GUM, situated opposite the Kremlin on the Red Square, in Moscow had a huge department of fashion design, founded in 1953, which could almost compete with the All-Union House in size and significance. (Fig. 1.1.) However, these two chains of organizations, the houses of fashion design at the Ministry of Light or Consumer Goods Industry and the fashion departments at the department stores, were not the only ones active in Soviet fashion. In addition, thousands of local fashion ateliers belonged to the system of *Indposhiv* (sewing customized clothes to order for individuals) and had their own fashion designers or at least pattern constructors who remade and modified existing clothing designs to make them more practical for sewing under the prevailing conditions. Often they designed their own clothes too. In the 1960s and 1970s, big centers of everyday services (*Doma byta*) were built all over the Soviet Union in all the Soviet cities as well as bigger regional, rural centers. They worked under their own administrative unit, the Ministry of Everyday Services. They were an important step in the modernization of Soviet domestic life and reduction of the burden of housework on women. In addition to a hairdresser, a laundry, and a beauty parlor, centers of everyday services also had, as a rule, a fashion atelier at which the local citizens could order individually made clothing. In the Soviet Union, fashion ateliers had as a rule several tailors and dressmakers on their payroll who made all kinds of clothes to order, from male and female outerwear to underwear, from everyday clothes to formal suits and dresses, as well as all kinds of garments for children and adolescents. Their sizes varied greatly, from large buildings in the great cities with dozens or even hundreds of employees to smaller provincial ones with only a couple of dressmakers and tailors. These fashion ateliers were classified in hierarchy of quality and price with 'de luxe' ateliers at the top. Finally, a fourth ministry, the Ministry of Local Industry also had its own institutes of fashion design and ateliers.

As if this were not enough, at the end of the 1950s the Ministry of Light Industry opened a new central, experimental fashion institute in Moscow, the All-Union Institute of the Assortments of the Products of Light Industry and the Culture of Dress (VIALegprom) in a new nine-story building with



Fig. 1.1. An evening gown of synthetic silk designed at the Department of Fashion Design of the State Department Store at Moscow, GUM, 1965 (designer Ivanova).

hundreds of employees. Its main task was the general planning of future fashion trends (*perspektivy*) and the coordination of the work of the houses of fashion design under their ministry. In other words, VIALegprom engaged itself in trendsetting. Moreover, it coordinated the efforts of the other fashion institutes each working in their own field or branch of administration. VIALegprom had the important task of designing ensembles of dress, from accessories and textiles to shoes and hats.

In practice, three huge parallel organizations of fashion design thus existed in the Soviet Union from the 1960s onward. They belonged to different administrative branches and organizations which worked under different ministries. The houses of fashion design were under the Ministry of Light Industry; the fashion ateliers and their design units under the Ministry of Trade; and finally, the ateliers of custom made clothes (*Indposhiv*) at the houses of everyday services under the Ministry of Everyday Services. Some fashion houses and ateliers also designed shoes and other kinds of leather goods as well as millinery and lingerie, but separate design organizations also existed which specialized in these areas of dress.

The Soviet Union was not renowned for its fashionable clothing. However, after the World War II the Soviet Government opened several parallel organizations of fashion design with fashion houses and ateliers all over the country. The post-war decades witnessed hot debates on destalinization, economic and social reforms and the increasing importance of the public opinion. The cold war and the peaceful competition between the two systems left their marks on clothes fashion. Fashion offers a good insight into Soviet economic planning. Despite increasing opulence, Soviet consumers were not satisfied. Soviet experts on fashion propagated small series of fashionable clothing and the opening of boutiques which never seriously challenged industrial mass production. Using a great variety of unique historical sources the book analyzes the changing economic, social and cultural conditions of Soviet fashion which faced many problems but had real achievements to show too.

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