

Fashion, Consumption and Everyday Culture in the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1985

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With its variety of disciplines, methods and sources, the conference, which put fashion and clothing at the centre for reflecting daily life and material culture, opened up to unknown perspectives on the history of the Soviet Union. From the end of the Great Patriotic War to the beginning of the Perestroika, papers enquired into both sides of Soviet life, the official state policy and the actual living conditions, in their interplay.

DJURDJA BARTLETT (London) provided ample and fascinating material for her thesis of the fundamentally different nature of Socialist (official) fashion in comparison to fashion in capitalist societies: The very ideological bases of Socialist societies (apart from the USSR she referred to Czechoslovakia, Eastern Germany, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia) as well as the pattern of production, regulated by Five year plans, prevented the development of proper fashion, i.e. a phenomenon intrinsically linked to fast speed, and to continuous reversal of former shapes. Yet beginning with the 1950s, a home-made fashion was developed, which did not obey the elegant conventionalism of official mode, but shows the desire of self-expression by means of clothing.

Partly in agreement with, partly in contradiction to such an account of Socialist fashion, OLGA GUROVA (St. Petersburg / Helsinki) shed light onto the importance of re-using clothes during Soviet times, e.g. by means of re-sewing new clothes from worn-out ones, something that changed during the 1990s, when an eagerness to quickly get new fashion prevailed, which again made place for slower modes of consumption. Thus for the USSR and Russia four types of fashion can be distinguished, namely congealed fashion (most of Soviet times), transitional fashion (in the 1990s), fast fashion (during the 2010s), and

sustainable fashion (after 2008) with a revival of handmade items.

Embedding fashion within the broader context of consumer society, ULRIKE GOLDSCHWEER (Bochum) argued that only with a de-ideologisation of the terminology and an understanding of the specifics of socialist consumption, daily life in the Soviet Union may be grasped. She discussed differences in meanings of „consume“ and its cognates in English, Russian and German; for accounts of daily life she pointed to websites which provide a source of collective memory, including a „history“ of clothes.

As LARISSA ZAKHAROVA (Paris) showed for the Khrushchev-period, fashion in that it was regulated by the government, and at the same time dependent upon individual production, which was influenced by Western fashion, serves as a mirror for the Thaw period and its various contradictions. For here the interplay of theory and production, the history of Soviet-Western economic contact and everyday life crystallize. From the different modes of production, state textile industry, tailors and sewing at home, over Soviet-Western economic relations, to daily life, i.e. the actual consumption of and preferences in clothing that favoured Western models and clothes, fashion brings to the fore a dynamization due to Western influences, while soviet ideology implies a static society. While official clothing policies stressed the functionality („funktional'nost“), for most individuals – and in particular it was women, only with the stiliagi in the 1960s men's wear became a milestone within the discourse of fashion – issues of beauty or rather „good taste“ were more important. This is but one of the aspects which gained shape by the different angles of the papers during the conference. ANNA IVANOVA (Moscow) drew attention to underground production at illegal clothing manufactures, in addition to the various ways of private cloth production addressed in other papers as well.

In daily clothing, individual expression shaped itself within visual regimes, which came to the fore with OKSANA BULGAKOVA's (Mainz) investigation of gestures in Russian and Soviet films, photography, visual arts and the theatre. Her documentary

„The Factory of Gestures“, pursues various aspects of body language and its historic development, including the changing symbolic dimensions over the times. For example, how the mode of walking changed from the end of the 19th century up to the 1960s reveals how influential pictures and films are for subjects' notions of what is normal and beautiful, and thus how a new society literally took shape.

The issue of individual expression and thus the turn away from the socialist ideal of an overall equality becomes most prominent with masquerade, as practiced in private contexts, something which became a continuously more widespread practice in the course of the 1970s and 1980s. LINOR GORALIK (Moscow) showed various photographs and interviews that told about practices of masquerade which display a huge variety of experimental and creative combinations of daily objects to be turned into masques. These provided room also for playing with gender roles, if not for transgender phenomena.

IRINA MUCHINA (Worcester) argued that in the Soviet Union there was not only and everywhere but the deficit of goods. At small port towns, where the control of unofficial trading was not as strict as in the main ports, there were so many Western goods, carefully selected by sailors according to their costumers' tastes, that these did not have the status of a symbol for a critical attitude against the regime, let alone the (almost) sacramental connotations which they acquired elsewhere.

ANNA TIKHOMIROVA (Bielefeld) pointed to the preference of Western goods (over Soviet ones) as well, but argued that – against the common view in historiography that the spreading of Western goods in socialist societies played a crucial role in the collapse of socialism – we need a more careful approach to the issue of (de-)stabilization. With respect to consumption, she questioned the usual equation of Western with capitalistic states. For clothes and shoes from the GDR were regarded as at least „almost-Western“. Once we differentiate among the socialist states, we come to acknowledge that in the USSR e.g. Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and in particular the GDR, which was taken as producing high quality fashion, were acknowledged as *functioning* socialist

consumer cultures. They thus proved that socialism could provide a good life, and hence confirmed a trust in the USSR.

Economic relations between different socialist countries were at the centre also of MILA OIVA's (Turku) extremely well presented paper on clothing exports to the USSR from Poland, which in the course of the 1960s and 1970s became one of the major importers. That a Polish Jazzband was playing at the first fashion show in Moscow in 1958 and thus underlined the overall urban atmosphere at this event, in a way foreshadowed the important role Poland came to play for supplying the USSR with clothes and shoes. In pursuing these trade relations until the beginning break down of the Polish economy in 1980, Oiva showed how both the Polish understanding of Russian needs and the Russian demands on Polish clothing changed over the years, in particular that an urge for higher quality and a greater variety of fabrics and models can be observed.

A number of papers turned to literature and films reflecting the evaluation of fashion and its changes. CHRISTINE ENGEL (Innsbruck) discussed examples of modern prose of the 1960s by authors such as Anatolii Kuznetsov, Anatolii Gladilin and Vasilii Aksënov, the „jeans prose“, against the background of the denouncement of stiliagi in the official discourse already in the 1950s. Against the Soviet ideological banning of innovative clothing, these authors in the context of fairly traditional plots somewhat surreptitiously took sides with the stiliagi, and thus played a pivotal role in normalising the general attitude towards individual and Western influenced dress styles. JULIA HARGASSNER (Salzburg) pointed to two examples of how literary prose took up political issues, in this case the Nylon War in Samuil Shatrov's „The Nylon Fur Coat“ (1963) and Sergei Dovlatov's „Finnish Crepe Socks“ (1982). Both novels show that nylon, Western as well as Soviet, are judged negatively and that the synthetic fibre proves „as an agent of capitalism in the nylon war“ (Hargassner), which was waged in 1953 with David Riesman's suggestion to „bombard“ the Soviet Union with consumer goods and came to an end only with the collapse of the Soviet Union. OLGA

CASPERS (Salzburg) with her paper on Edward Limonov turned to the Russian tradition of the dandy-poet. She investigated the role of clothing as a semiotic code and its metapoetic dimension, based on the poet's paralleling of poetry as a craft with sewing and designing clothes. From a linguistic point of view, KATHARINA KLINGSEIS (Vienna) investigated Viacheslav Zaitsev's „Ėtot mnogo-likii mir mody“, published in 1982, as „a specimen of Soviet writing on fashion“ (Klingseis). She showed the polyphony of voices in the text, which provides various, at times contradicting assessments of fashion, thus arguably opening up to the possibility of dealing with fashion in a more varied and in the end more sophisticated way.

While KATARYNA NOVIKOVA (Warsaw) on account of a variety of films mostly from the 1950s and 1960s discussed the possibilities of self-expression by means of fashion in terms of differentiation, imitation and invention, NATALIA STAROSTINA (Young Harris) argued on account of Soviet movies – most notably Eldar Riazanov's „Office Romance“ (1977) – that in the 1970s and 1980s it was a necessary prerequisite for successful women to dress fashionably. From the 1970s onwards, fashion achieved an increasingly important place in the society, fostered by the state: Courses of dress making and knitting were offered, magazines such as „Krest'ianka“ or „Rabotnica“ included sewing patterns, girls learnt sewing at school, and fabrics were well available at shops. What originally was a governmental answer to the economies of deficit with its continuous shortage of clothes led to individual styles in dressing and turned out to „play a crucial role in exonerating fashion from the attributes of presumably anti-Soviet lifestyle“ (Starostina).

ELENA HUBER (Salzburg) showed on the basis of women's magazines and conduct books of the 1950s and 1960s how a new female identity was shaped, according to which women – who were supposed to be as much mothers and housewives as to have a successful career – should be beautiful. The notion of beauty, closely linked to „good taste“ and „reasonable decision“, is graspable in particular with the individual practices of self-made clothing. Here magazines display the values

and norms at the same time as they allow for conclusions about women's real lives in a period, when a new cultural paradigm developed, in which privacy became established as something legitimate, and almost a „cult of everything domestic and peaceful“ (Huber) can be observed.

The final paper by YULIA GRADSKOVA (Stockholm) somewhat took over the role of a summary of recurring issues at the conference, such as differences between the centres to the peripheries, or changes over time which display an enormous variety of clothing. It thus pointed once more to the necessity to focus not exclusively on Western versus Socialist distinctions, but to study more carefully the diversity within the Soviet Union or with respect to other Socialist countries, which was stressed in the concluding discussion once more. With the concepts of „good taste“ and „beauty“, values and norms lied at the heart of Gradska's study on account of interviews and women's journals.

In the course of the conference with its focus on material culture, details about Soviet daily life came up to a remarkable degree and in an unusual variety. It is not least by means of such details, which are linked in one way or another to fashion and material culture, that a much richer picture of what living in the Soviet Union was like and thus a better understanding of its recent history and of socialism, gain shape. As the conference showed, it is a way of going around the good old patterns of distinguishing between West and East, capitalist and socialist states.

Conference Overview:

Larissa Zakharova (Paris): Soviet Fashion in the 1950s–1960s: the Contradictions of the Thaw

Ulrike Goldschweer (Bochum): Konsumkultur und Nostalgie. Artefakte als Medium der Erinnerungskultur im russischen Internet (am Beispiel von Kleidung und Mode)

Anna Tikhomirova (Bielefeld): Consumption of East German Clothing by Soviet Women in the Brezhnev Era: Reflections on Transfer and Comparison of Fashion Cultures in the USSR and the GDR

Irina Muchina (Worcester): From Rags to

Riches? Port Cities and Consumerism of the Soviet 1970s and '80s

Mila Oiva (Turku): Soviet Consumers in the Eyes of the Polish Clothing Exporters, 1956 – 1982

Olga Gurova (Helsinki / Michigan): How the Concept of Consumption in the Former Socialist State of Russia has changed? 'Congealed', 'Fast' and 'Slow' Fashion

Katharina Klingseis (Vienna): Das „Sowjetische“ im neoliberalen Dress-Code-Diskurs? Eine Textanalyse

Christine Engel (Innsbruck): Пижоны, стилиаги, чувихи, попугаи... Spiele der Differenz in der Jeans Prosa

Olga Caspers (Salzburg): Der Dichter zieht an. Limonov als Schneidermeister der sowjetischen Subkulturen

Julia Hargassner (Salzburg): Der Nylonkrieg und seine Auswirkungen im sowjetischen literarischen Diskurs der 1960er-Jahre

Natalia Starostina (Young Harris) / Elena Troubitsyna (Turku): New Clothes, New Life: Fashion in Shaping a Soviet Identity in the Late 1970s-Early 1980s

Kateryna Novikova (Warsaw): Differentiation, Imitation and Invention: Dress and Clothing Styles in the Soviet Movies in the 1960-1980s

Oksana Bulgakowa (Mainz): Factory of Gestures

Elena Huber (Salzburg): Was braucht man zum Glücklichsein? Ästhetische Inszenierung des weiblichen Alltags in den sowjetischen Frauenzeitschriften und Benimmbüchern der 1950-1960er-Jahre

Linor Goralik (Moskow): Red Devils and White Rabbits: Identity, Compliance and Rebellion in the Late Soviet Masquerade

Anna Ivanova (Moscow): Tsekhoviki: Underground Production of Clothes in the USSR

Djurdja Bartlett (London): Myth and Reality: Five year Plans and Socialist Fashion (Keynote)

Yulia Gradszkova (Stockholm): Making Yourself Beautiful? Everyday Life and Beauty Practices in Soviet Russia in the 1950-1960s

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