books & ideas.net

Fashion, Soviet style?

Julie HESSLER

What about fashion in the Soviet Union, during Khrushchev's partial opening to the West? This question frames Larissa Zakharova's impressive new study, which uses clothing and fashion as a window onto wider economic, social, cultural, and political processes. Above all, Zakharova captures the growing rift between the methods and promises of the socialist economy and the increasingly Westernized consciousness of Soviet consumers.

Reviewed: Larissa Zakharova, *S'habiller à la soviétique. La mode et le Dégel en URSS.* Paris: CNRS Editions, 2011. 406 pp., 25,56 €

Style and individualism vs. planning and ideology

Fashion fit uncomfortably within the planned economy for both ideological and structural reasons. Ideologically, fashion was identified with the manipulation of capitalism and with Western bourgeois society. During the 1950s and early 1960s, this pejorative sense was particularly applied to *stiliagi*, jazz-loving non-conformist youths, who were said to chase after Western fashions and to favor exaggerated styles that offended good taste. Yet, at the same time, Soviet officials emphasized the increasing wellbeing of the Soviet population, which was assumed to be expressed not just in the growing quantity of consumer goods available to consumers but also in consumers' reasonable expectation of high quality and contemporary design.

Structurally, fashion was problematic for the Soviet economy, because it undermined the rational utilization of goods. Planning in the textile and clothing sector rested on model wardrobes, with a planned lifespan of for each item. For example, consumers were determined to require three coats in various weights, each of which was expected to last for quite a number of years. If consumers suddenly insisted on replacing coats that were still in good condition for reasons of fashion, they disrupted the planned equilibrium. Outmoded coats would now lie unsold on the shelf while newer styles immediately sold out. Planners' objectives in the realm of fashion were to slow down stylistic evolution and to emphasize styles deemed to be "outside" fashion – conservative, classic cuts such as that of a traditional English suit. Manufacturers and retailers reinforced this conservatism, with the former attempting to conserve production processes as long as possible and the latter basing each year's orders on customer demand from the previous year.

The image of Soviet fashion as derivative of, not to mention behind, Western fashion, is mostly supported by Zakharova's study, but it also documents attempts to create a distinctively Soviet style. Following the lead of Nadezhda Lamanova, an influential fashion designer and theorist of the late imperial and early Soviet eras, Soviet designers promoted an aesthetic of simplicity, naturalism, and functionality. Their institutional home was the Maisons des Modèles [*Dom modelei*], which were charged with developing clothing designs for both industrial manufacturers and custom-sewing ateliers. Soviet designers identified with the mission of educating consumers' tastes, so prominent in the Stalin era, but during the Thaw, they were also acutely aware of fashion developments in the West and advocated novelty over unchanging styles. While the extensive vetting process for new designs tended to relegate the most innovative patterns to fashion exhibits or individual reproduction in ateliers, as against mass production, designers saw themselves as artists, indeed avant-garde artists, whose role was to lead Soviet society toward the new.

East/West transfers

Western clothes and fashions made inroads into the Soviet system in both official and unofficial ways. At the most basic level, Soviet clothing manufacturing was reliant on imported Western equipment and textiles, and factories constantly lobbied for more. More intriguingly, consumers and designers were exposed to Western fashions through expositions organized in part by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Trade. In the case of French fashion, the first invitation went, rather incongruously, to the Maison Dior, which displayed Yves Saint-Laurent's collection in a huge fashion show at Gorky Park in 1959.

The show was heavily covered in the international press, and one former Dior executive has suggested that Dior's main goal was to capitalize on the current interest in things Soviet in the rich American market. For Soviet fashion designers and students, many of whom assisted at the presentation, the show afforded a rare opportunity to observe and sketch Western models. At other international exhibits, which occurred with surprising frequency during the Thaw years, Soviet agencies bought up all the models off the floor and proceeded to have the All-Union Maison des Modèles take them apart with an eye to reproducing them in Soviet factories. The expositions and fashion shows thus influenced Soviet fashion both directly and indirectly: through the acquisition of new patterns, through the integration of Soviet designers into the international fashion circuit, through the acculturation of the Soviet design world to the seasonal rhythm of fashion presentation and change, and through the exposure of Soviet consumers, who thronged to the shows, to Western styles.

Consumers did, of course, encounter Western fashions through other, less official channels. Tourism to the West was one; though quite restricted in scale during the Khrushchev years, it served as a conduit for Western consumer goods to enter into the Soviet market. Virtually all travelers made purchases during their trips, and these sometimes made their way into the hands of *fartsovshchiki*, informal sellers of foreign goods. Visitors from abroad were another. In this regard, Zakharova provides an interesting new angle on the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Moscow in 1957. Although participants in the Festival were overwhelmingly leftist in their political orientations, they did not hesitate to try to get around Soviet currency exchange regulations by selling clothes and other consumer goods. Hotel rooms and courtyards where the foreign youths were staying and sidewalks adjacent to "commission" stores for the resale of personal items were turned into "veritable bazars," while Soviet police struggled to contain this trade by arresting the Soviet purchasers. The Festival brought to light a more casual, youth-oriented side of Western fashion, as against the formal *haute couture* presented in fashion magazines and international exhibitions. According to one participant's memoirs, the Soviet fad for jeans began there. It was no doubt reinforced by Western cinema, which was closely scrutinized by Soviet viewers for fashion tips.

Self-expression through clothing?

Zakharova devotes the final third of her book to consumer practices and cultures. To dress fashionably in the Soviet Union required a great deal of personal effort, and it also compelled one to engage with the informal private sector. In the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, Soviet citizens still obtained the majority of their clothing in the form of cloth, which was then sewn to order or made up at home. As in other countries, home sewing was partly a means of economizing on clothing, but it also gave more scope to fashion and individual self-expression than the mass-produced clothing available in Soviet shops. Notably, among sixteen people whom Zakharova interviewed for the purposes of developing a typology of Soviet consumer cultures, the most fashion-conscious group utilized private seamstresses, custom tailoring at ateliers, and home sewing the most and generally tried to avoid Soviet state stores.

Zakharova's book provides information on the functioning of the black market and the state's relationship to it during the Thaw years, and also on the perennial weaknesses of the retail sector. Here, as elsewhere, Zakharova's discussion is informative and thorough, though the findings are somewhat less novel than in other parts of the book. The dismal portrait of retail offerings out of sync with the season and of self-provisionment by store clerks suggests little change from the Stalin years. With regard to the black market, *fartsovshchiki* seem to have made their appearance during the Thaw, but they too had their predecessors in the so-called "trophy trade" of the immediate postwar years. The scale of black market operations may have increased, judging from the regular appearance of new goods from Moscow and Leningrad in the bazars of Central Asia, but otherwise Zakharova's description of the black market is familiar in all particulars from what we know of the Stalin era. The regime's approach to it was also strongly in the Stalinist mold, with the apparent softening of criminal sanctions in 1957 actually tending to increase the severity of punishment by virtue of the fact that judges would now apply the law.

In her treatment of consumption, and to a lesser extent in other sections, Zakharova's discussion could have benefited from a wider chronological lens. Her data, drawn primarily from household budget studies, sheds light on the specifics of consumption between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s; one notable finding was the decline of purchasing power from 1962-1964. Still, we would have liked to know how the methods and levels of consumption of the Khrushchev era fit within the longer durée of Soviet history. The author gestures back to the Stalin period occasionally, but could do so more systematically, and it would have been extremely interesting if she could have sketched out which parts of her story outlasted the Khrushchev years.

In conclusion, *S'habiller à la soviétique* is a major study that expands our knowledge in diverse ways. A detailed analytical history, it is not likely to be engaging to the casual reader, but Zakharova's cogent argumentation and unusually impressive research merit the attention of anyone with a serious interest in the Khrushchev era, consumption, Soviet professional milieus, or the Westernization of postwar Soviet culture.

Published in booksandideas.net, 17th September 2012

©booksandideas.net