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Fashion meets socialism

Gronow, Jukka & Zhuravlev, Sergey 2015. *Fashion Meets Socialism*. Fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War. *Studia Fennica Historica*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 303 pp. ISBN: 978-952-222-665-5. ISSN: 0085-6835.

Fashionable clothing is not the first thing we often associate with the former Soviet Union. Quite the contrary – Soviet citizens are remembered as dressing in old-fashioned, standardised, uniform and grey clothing. They are, especially in Finland, also remembered for their eagerness for Western clothing, which gave tourists an easy way to increase their travel budget. The shortage of clothing in the Soviet Union, together with the fact that the unofficial exchange rate was much more profitable for tourists than the official exchange rate, created a black market in which stockings, jeans and other clothing that tourists smuggled into the country were exchanged for rubles or vodka. In their fascinating book, *Fashion Meets Socialism*, Jukka Gronow, professor emeritus of history, who has previously studied, e.g. the history of luxury, and Sergey Zhuravlev, research director of the Institute of Russian History at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, show that promoting fashion and improving the standards of clothing was a very important part of the general politics of material culture in the Soviet Union. Actually, the Soviet Union had one of the world's largest organisations of fashion design of its time. The problems of the regulated economy and the serious shortage of raw materials, however, prevented it from achieving its aims.

Fashion meets Socialism focuses particularly on the post-war Soviet culture of dress, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is also a comprehensive study of Soviet fashion and the dress industry from 1917 to end of the 1980s. Gronow and

Zhuravlev's research is based on the state, party and department archives of the former Soviet Union, but they also use oral history material collected by interviewing, e.g. engineers in the garment factories, designers, models and other workers from the fashion ateliers and garment factories. Gronow and Zhuravlev discuss the Soviet culture of dress by studying the establishment and development of the Soviet fashion industry and design and how they were organised. There were altogether four parallel organisations working under the Ministry of Light Industry, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Everyday Services and the Ministry of Local Industry. The consumption of fashion is addressed in chapters that discuss the role of the fashion department in the State Department Store GUM in Moscow and the public discussion of the culture of dress in the Soviet Press.

In the Soviet Union, dress was a political question and the book also explores the role that dress and fashion were given by Soviet authorities. Gronow and Zhuravlev point out that the establishment of the Soviet Fashion institutions was an integral part of the process of modernisation led from above, which aimed at promoting good taste. The Soviet authorities thought that rational and scientific economic planning would inevitably lead to greater material abundance and well-being as well as to the general beautification of human life. The centrally planned economy aimed at modernising the foundations of the whole society as quickly as possible. In the pre-war years, many Soviet citizens had only recently moved from villages, with traditional modes of behaviour and styles, to the new urban and industrial centres. Modernisation meant urbanisation and industrialisation, but also adapting to a new way of life with new, socialist manners and etiquette. This new, Soviet way of life therefore also represented the cultivation of taste. In this respect, the

dress code and the standards of sartorial taste were very important because clothes are the most visible exterior sign of a person's social status.

The soviet authorities acknowledged that the Soviet system could not possibly abolish or successfully fight against fashion, which they regarded as an external force of nature, because women in particular needed fashion and were expecting new designs every season. Though this fact could not be changed, the Soviet theorists of fashion pointed out that the problems inherent in fashion could still be solved by educating popular taste and by increasing the general cultural standards of the Soviet population.

There were political campaigns – mostly against the Westernisation of Soviet fashion – and fashion design was given the important task of raising cultural standards. Therefore, fashion design was oriented towards functional and practical design. Much attention was paid to work clothes and other uniforms. Also, the question of designing clothes for 'big' women was addressed.

The book illuminates quite well both the aims of Soviet fashion as well as the many problems that had to be tackled within a highly regulated and centrally planned economy. Before any new clothing was put into production, it had to be accepted by the artistic council, which was supposed to pay attention primarily to the aesthetic quality and fashionableness of clothing. In practice, the decisions were made on the basis of more concrete questions, such as the limited assortment of fabrics and other raw materials and amount of modern machinery available. It was also very important to fulfil the given quota. The shortage of many basic consumer goods caused many problems. As it was difficult to find good cosmetics in Moscow, models had to conduct their own 'laboratory experiments' before the shows, even going so far as to 'cook' eyeliner and lipstick themselves.

Since fashion and dress were given such an important role in helping transform Soviet society and culture, they were given lots of space in the mass media. Problems such as the bad quality of the mass-produced clothes were not concealed, but instead were discussed openly because consumers' complaints were an important part of the Soviet system of public control.

The detailed description of the organisational structure of the Soviet fashion industry would have benefited from comparisons with the Western fashion system, especially for those readers who are not familiar with how it functions or how it functioned in the 1950s and 1960s. It took up to a year in the Soviet Union to get the fashion designs from a sketch into the department store. How does this compare with the US or France? By contrasting the Soviet fashion system with that in the West, the special features of the former could have been pointed out more clearly. With constant changes and with the strong role played by abstract meanings, the fashion industry is, after all, a very special kind of industry also in the West. Likewise, the history of the mass manufacturing of clothing is similar in the West, at least in Finland, and in the Soviet Union: mass manufacturing made fashionable clothing more affordable and available to ordinary people in the 1920s, and when production was rationalised during WWII and in the years after the war, almost all of the clothing consisted of ready-to-wear garments.

One chapter discusses the Tallinn House of Fashion Design, Tallinna moemaja, and briefly also the role of ordinary Finns in the Soviet fashion system. Tallinna moemaja was a typical example of a local fashion house that was established in all of the Soviet republics and larger industrial centres. Due to its proximity to Finland, it also served as an important bridge to Western fashion. It served mainly the local garment industry, but its designs were well received in the rest of the Soviet Union as well. The reputation of Estonian fashion was based on its history and geographical location: before WWII, it had been a modern, Western country located close to Finland. The leading designers from all over the Soviet Union visited Tallinn regularly in order to get inspiration and new ideas about fashion trends. New ideas were brought to Tallinn especially by thousands of tourists, mainly those from Finland; the Western fashion trends were learned of by studying how the tourists dressed. The programmes on Finnish TV could also be watched in Tallinn. Concrete examples of new fashionable clothes and textiles were also obtained by studying carefully the fashion mag-

azines and pieces of clothing that were brought to Estonia by tourists or sent by relatives living in the West. The pieces of clothing that were smuggled to Soviet Estonia could therefore end

up in the hands of a fashion designer and get a new life in multiple copies.

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