THE SPECTRE THAT HAUNTED SOCIALISM

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FOR ANA AND DANKO
In 2004, while researching socialist fashion in Moscow, I met Lydia Orlova, a fashion journalist, author, and former editor of several Soviet fashion magazines. Orlova had been a dedicated Communist party member under socialism and was still a beautiful woman genuinely interested in fashion. During the later phases of socialism she had been a powerful promoter of fashion. In the late 1970s, as fashion editor of the most popular mass women’s weekly, Rabotnitsa (Working woman), she had consistently presented information about Western fashion and introduced paper patterns from the German women’s magazine Burda. However, during the Perestroika years in the late 1980s, Orlova argued in the mighty Communist party daily Pravda that socialism deserved its own proper fashion. Through her high-level political connections, she managed to revive three Soviet fashion magazines to compete with the arrival of Burda on the Soviet market. Far removed from the reality of the poor-quality clothing provided in the shops, and presenting exclusive prototypes of dresses designed within the central fashion institution, the Dom modelei in Moscow, these Soviet magazines looked even more luxurious and elitist than Burda. During our interview, Orlova told me: “Believe me, Dior had many more fans in the USSR than in France.”

Indeed, in 1959 the Soviets had invited the fashion house Christian Dior to present its latest collection in Moscow’s sports hall, called The Soviet Wings Club. Street posters helped to widely publicize Dior’s fashion show. The mass weekly Ogonek excitedly stated that “Soviet women would finally have the chance to see Paris fashion that, for centuries, has dictated new trends to half of the world’s population.” Dior’s highest representatives and twelve fashion models stayed on in Moscow for a week, presenting two to three shows a day with 120 outfits. Heavily scented with Dior’s perfumes, the hall’s eight hundred seats could not accommodate all the women who wanted to see the fashion house’s summer dresses, which were modeled with background music from the latest Paris and New York soundtracks. The audience consisted of women designers and employees from the textile industry, young actresses, and nomenklatura wives and daughters.

This total fascination with the most famous representative of Western fashion, combined with support for a genuine socialist fashion that would be able to compete sartorially with the West and eventually overtake it, while simultaneously neglecting the reality that the average woman could find only poor-quality clothing in the stores, encapsulated all the contradictions of fashion under socialism. While preaching modesty in personal appearance, the socialist regimes were fascinated by an elitist, haute couture type of dress. The elitism and exclusivity that lies at the core of high fashion suited the high-minded aspirations of totalitarian ideology, and led to the invention of the phenomenon that I call “socialist fashion.”
While this book also covers two other sartorial practices under socialism—utopian dress and everyday fashion—socialist fashion was its unique and most durable sartorial product. It was born in the mid-1930s in the Stalinist Soviet Union and survived until the end of the 1980s, both in the Soviet Union and in the East European socialist countries covered by my research—Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. Although socialism eventually invented its own fashion, it was not the genuinely new socialist dress style that the constructivists had dreamt of in the early 1920s. On the contrary, socialist fashion officially preferred the most conventional aesthetic and promoted the most conventional concept of gender. This book presents its story, following its rise from the crushed utopian dream of the early Bolsheviks in the 1920s Soviet Union through its enforcement in the East European countries following the Communists’ coups in 1948, and its gradual demise in the later decades of socialism. Embedded in socialism’s slow-moving master narrative and sharing its fear of change and discontinuity, socialist fashion lost its struggle against its dynamic and ever-changing Western counterpart. But its very existence—manifested in the regimes’ large-scale efforts to maintain it through their central fashion institutions, and to promote it through their women’s magazines—showed the socialist system’s deep anxieties about the phenomenon of fashion.

By paraphrasing the first sentence of the Communist Manifesto, the title of this book suggests that fashion was a spectre that haunted socialism. As an ephemeral, incomplete, and ever-changing phenomenon, fashion contradicted and seriously challenged socialist values, which were organized around stability, fear of change, predictability, and eternity. Although central planning, shortages, a controlled and undeveloped market, and political turbulence are not the main focus of this book, they are the background against which we can explore the conceptual and practical aspects of the phenomenon of fashion—surroundings that differed significantly from its conventional setting. Thus, this book covers the hitherto unknown part of fashion history that took place on the other side of the divide, designated both geographically and politically as “East Europe.”

The official and unofficial spaces which accommodated socialist fashion showed that it was an elitist phenomenon, as its practices required time, money, and connections. In that context, my interviewees were privileged, as they had mainly been practitioners within the official fashion institutions and the official media. But most of them, such as Lydia Orlova, Dorothea Melis, Eva Mézsáros, and Margit Szilvitzky, to name just a few, were also capable and well-educated professionals who would probably have succeeded in any fashion system. I am very grateful to them, as to all my other interviewees, for their time and their willingness to talk to me. It was my privilege to hear their thoughts and their memories. My empirical research included various written and visual sources, from women’s magazines, picture weeklies, political dailies, state archives, printed materials from museum collections, and posters and films, but spoken sources added a special and lively experience to it.

In that sense, the twenty-four interviews I held with participants in various fields of fashion production, including fashion designers, managers of central fashion institutions, models, organizers of official fashion shows and fairs, journalists, and authors, enriched my
insights on the topic of fashion under socialism. Nevertheless, my main research source on socialist fashion was women’s magazines, which were informed by the conventions of both fashion journals and political bulletins. As the magazines were state-owned, the regimes channeled all official policies on dress and gender through them. Although highly controlled and carefully composed, these magazines nevertheless revealed the contradictions within the system and its confrontations with the everyday.

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This book focuses on three main socialist sartorial narratives—utopian dress, socialist fashion, and everyday fashion—that unfolded over the course of seventy-two years in the Soviet Union, and forty-two years in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. The symbolic production of the first of these sartorial narratives, that of utopian dress, was informed by the initial Bolshevik rejection of the past and the search for a totally new type of clothing in the 1920s. Later, the dream of creating a utopia in East European countries following the Communist takeover also led to an insistence on an austere and simple style of dress. The second fashion narrative, socialist fashion, which predominated in the Soviet Union from the 1930s, and in East Central Europe from the mid-1950s, showed that the socialist regimes had failed in their efforts to create an egalitarian and utilitarian sartorial style. Instead, socialist fashion relied on presenting unique prototypes at domestic and international fairs and at socialist fashion congresses. Expressed through traditional aesthetics and conventional notions of gender, socialist fashion reflected the regimes’ ontological fear of change and discontinuity within a slow-moving socialist master narrative. Both utopian dress and socialist fashion were ideological constructs expressed through highly orchestrated representational narratives. In contrast, everyday fashion increasingly prospered beginning in the late 1960s. It found its place within everyday life and its rituals, and was embedded in an unofficial, faster-moving modernity. Everyday fashion involved numerous individual acts of appropriation through which socialist women indigenized and adjusted Western fashion trends to their needs.

Utopian Dress

Can fashion—a phenomenon deeply rooted in its own past and the past of Western civilization—start from zero? Following the 1917 October Revolution, the Bolsheviks tested that hypothesis to its limits through ideological programs, artistic practices, and everyday life. An urgent need for a new style of dress was just one element in the clean break with the past that the revolutionary originators of the socialist system envisioned in every field. No other revolution rejected tradition more strongly or attempted so vigorously to provoke an absolute break in continuity between the past and the present. Embedded as it is in both the present and the past, fashion could not escape the radical nature of the political and social changes that were taking place, and which were completely transforming the Russian state and society. In the constructivist world, there was no space for frivolous or unpredictable changes brought about by fashion trends, nor any place for a fashionable woman. She was overdecorated for their functional taste, oversexualized for their puritanical values, and alienated in an ontological sense because she belonged to a past that they
did not recognize. Wanting to discard preexisting fashion, the arts, and applied arts, the constructivists embraced geometric abstraction as their visual language.

The Russia of the 1920s was modernist in many ways. The archmodernist Le Corbusier saw Lenin as not only a political iconoclast but also a visual one. Detecting a new geometrical order in the clean lines of Lenin’s bowler hat, his smooth white collar, his white porcelain coffee cup, his simple glass inkpot, and the sheets of typing paper on which he wrote for hours in the café Rotonda in Paris, Le Corbusier declared: “He is teaching himself to govern one hundred million people” (Le Corbusier 1987, 7–8). As it turned out, Lenin did indeed conduct his revolution in a Western suit. The new socialist country that he created initially preserved its artistic and sartorial connections to the West. Fashion briefly returned during the commercially favorable early 1920s, when the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced a semicapitalist system in Russia. The confrontation between Bolshevik political power, which opposed fashion, and the economic power of the NEP, which promoted it, gave rise to an ideological and conceptual split that ran through the Soviet social body throughout the 1920s (fig. 0.1).

Challenged by the seductive NEP culture, even the Bolsheviks did not dare to officially ban decoration altogether. Even though industrially mass-produced dress was the official aspiration, individually made artistic dress still had its supporters at the highest level of Bolshevik power. The fashion designer Nadezhda Lamanova enjoyed official support from the Commissariat of Enlightenment in her use of traditional crafts as a basis for a genuinely new socialist style in dress throughout the 1920s. These debates on handicrafts and industry were embedded within a broader European discourse taking place at the time on the relationship between the crafts and industrial production. However, the development that was needed to transform such artisanal pieces into sophisticated but industrially manufactured goods never occurred in Russia. A permanent confusion between craft and industrial modes of production was perpetuated by official announcements claiming that exquisite handmade artifacts could successfully be turned into mass-manufactured products without losing any of their quality.

When Stalin came to power at the end of the 1920s, the utopian dream ended in the Soviet Union. However, the early Bolshevik utopia became a model for the later attempts to build utopias in East Europe after World War II. As in Russia, these utopias had a precise starting point. Chronologically, they started in 1948, after the Communists came to power in the East European countries. Ideologically, the start of the East European utopias announced the breakdown of capitalist culture. This sudden rejection of all previous culture and the ways of producing it was even more shocking in East Europe than it had been in Russia in 1917, as those countries had had a capitalist system before the war. In Russia, poverty and industrial backwardness had confined the constructivist ideas on functional, clean-lined style of dress to a limbo of esoteric artistic practice. In contrast, the textile and clothing industries were far more developed in prewar East Europe. But these traditions, both symbolic and economic, of prewar fashion production had to be urgently repositioned so that new roles for the textile and clothing industries could be established (fig. 0.2).
FIGURE 0.1
Fashion drawing, Iskusstvo odevat’sia,
Leningrad (1928, no. 7).
FIGURE 0.2
Nők lapja, Budapest
(August 1952), back cover.
In parallel, a new functional aesthetics was hastily introduced, as well as a new concept of woman. She was officially perceived as a worker dressed in a practical work uniform, as the new states privileged class over gender. Just as in Russia in the 1920s, this view demonstrated a serious political effort to deconstruct the previous gender order. The utopian element was strongest immediately following World War II, when the East European regimes were establishing a new political and social order. As in the 1920s dress proposals of the Soviet constructivists, there was no place for fashion because the new Communist regimes wanted to abolish all previous traditions. Under Soviet political control, the new regimes’ search for a new style of dress and a new woman became merely a ritualistic repetition of the early Bolshevik efforts at creating utopia. The East European regimes used the ideology of utopia to free space for the advancing Stalinist culture and its concept of socialist fashion.

Socialist Fashion

While Bolshevik and East European attempts at utopia had rejected fashion, it received official approval in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s. Developing within a system that was highly centralized, socialist fashion gradually evolved into a unique phenomenon of its own. That system was introduced as part of the Stalinist industrialization drive designed to raise the technical and organizational levels of the backward Russian textile and clothing industries. In the end it arrested the development of fashion under socialism, not only in the Soviet Union but also in East Europe following the end of World War II. Whereas the Bolshevik utopia had advocated a total change in dress, change became an ontological obstacle for a system organized around five-year plans and hierarchical levels of decision making because, in contrast to Western fluidity and rapid change, the epic socialist master narrative expressed itself through a slow flow of time.

While real change in styles of dress was highly suspect, Stalinism created a space for socialist fashion with the opening of the Dom modelei (House of Prototypes) in Moscow in 1935. That institution was supposed to organize and coordinate the textile and clothing industries and design prototypes for mass production in the whole country. Following the end of World War II, the establishment of a chain of regional Dom modelei under the umbrella of the central institution completed the Soviet hierarchical model. Although these institutions physically existed, socialist fashion did not exist in the real world; it inhabited the limitless space of Stalinist mythical culture. That culture incorporated different elements, from Russian medieval history to Hollywood glamour, gluing these disparate historical phenomena together in an amalgam that would suit the political needs of the Stalinist system (fig. 0.3).

Situated within the Stalinist myth, socialist fashion conformed to its ontological status and its aesthetics of socialist realism. Generally speaking, myth and fashion share very few characteristics. Fashion is a modernist, fast-changing phenomenon immersed in everyday reality, while myth is conservative and traditional, preserving the status quo. Their relationship to the past is also different. Fashion grabs its quotations from the past erratically and unpredictably, while myth is loyal to specific historical moments. Unlike Bolshevism, which
FIGURE 0.3
Fashion drawing, *Modeli sezona*,
Moscow (1939–1940, no. 4).
attempted to expel history from its new world and impose immediate change, Stalinism imposed an aesthetics that was greatly indebted to premodernist times. Photographs and artistic images of the two leaders, Lenin and Stalin, demonstrate the shift from a modernist visual culture into conservative and traditional iconographic forms. The well-established iconography of Lenin in paintings, which depict him in a suit and tie even on the revolutionary barricades, suggests a dynamic and still open relationship with the West, while Stalin’s attire—a uniform resembling a traditional Russian peasant tunic, or *tolstovka*—was an iconographic symbol of his society’s return to conservative and immutable forms. Prototypes of elegant dresses decorated with ethnic motifs played an important role in the promotion of Stalinist culture in magazines, advertisements, political posters, the fine arts, films, and theater. Yet, as historical accounts of the period demonstrate, the Stalinist concept of luxury, presented through idealistic media images, contradicted the everyday reality.

The East European states were forced to adopt the same centralized model of dress production following the Communist takeovers in 1948. The first task of their new central dress institutions was to destroy the prewar symbolic and material sartorial traditions in order to implement a new utopian dress. However, by institutionalizing utopia, the regimes toned it down, both conceptually and aesthetically. The East European utopias stood little chance in front of the advancing Soviet socialist fashion. Dependent both politically and ideologically on their Soviet masters, the new regimes could neither stop nor slow down the course of industrialization which, following postwar deprivations, further impoverished their citizens and extended the rationing of everyday goods well into the 1950s. From the mid-1950s, the East European regimes adopted the Soviet model of the grandiose sartorial prototype to suit the mythical reality in which they found shelter from the irresolvable problems which their planned economies faced in everyday life. Escape into myth prevented the development of any space for new socialist style of dress.

From the late 1950s, with the growing representational role of socialist fashion, the central dress institutions incorporated the word “fashion” into their names, even though they maintained their ideological role of controlling unpredictable change. In this context, the position of fashion designers in the central fashion institutions was identical to the position of the socialist realist artists. As Joseph Bakshtein observes: “The main task of the artist was to use a representation as an index of some ‘other,’ non-artistic circumstances, whether social, political, economic, or ideological” (Bakshtein 1993, 57). Similarly, in the field of socialist fashion, dress was not about fashion as an everyday object. Instead, images of smart and luxurious dresses were an ideal medium to visualize the progress that the socialist regimes dreamed of. To paraphrase Guy Debord, they showed that power had accumulated to such a degree that it became an image (fig. 0.4).³

In the late 1950s, Khrushchev struggled to impose a new modesty and clean modernist lines that resembled constructivist purism and restraint. He launched a new aesthetics, that of socialist good taste, which embellished the original proletarian austerity with new categories of modest prettiness and conventional elegance. Unlike the constructivists who had envisioned the new society and its objects against a background of technological