

INTRODUCTION

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.¹ 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).²

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

backwardness, Khrushchev attempted to channel some of the latest technological developments into the design and production of everyday clothes that fulfilled the new criteria of functionality and simple, untroubled prettiness. But he did not succeed. Simplicity was officially promoted, but socialist fashion stayed indebted to Stalinist grandiose aesthetics. The socialist regimes continued to rely on the concept of representational dress. Such dress could not be bought in the shop. It was exclusively produced as a unique prototype, presented at domestic and international fairs and socialist fashion congresses, and published in the magazines. This representational prototype, introduced through the Bolshevik artistic dress of the 1920s and perfected by Stalinism within its mythical culture, continued to exist until the end of the socialist system. At the same time, socialist good taste was the official aesthetics in the everyday. It was granted political approval because it was ordinary, anonymous, moderate, and banal.

Introduced under Stalinism, the traditional concept of womanhood fitted well into the smart and conventional aesthetics of socialist fashion. The women's organizations, institutionally and ideologically close to the Communist parties, disseminated the official gender politics through practices ranging from educational courses on hygiene and healthy cooking to grooming and fashion shows. They promoted the official shifts in the conceptualization of gender, and instructed women on correct dress and manners through the mass magazines that they controlled. Beginning in the 1950s, socialist regimes recognized the growing demand for fashion and grooming by the female members of their newly installed middle classes. Consequently, the notion of gender softened, and women's magazines encouraged moderate expressions of femininity. Modest fashion, conforming to socialist good taste, became one element of the cultural capital of the socialist middle classes. In order to compete with the West in everyday lifestyles, the socialist regimes wanted to dress up their middle classes, but, at the same time, they also wanted to control their sartorial choices. In the end, both versions of socialist taste—grandiose and modest—served the official politics of style from the 1960s. In aesthetics these two styles differed widely, but they shared the same fear of unpredictable change (fig. 0.5).

Socialist fashion was always simply a discourse, with little concern about reality. Even the shifts toward fashionability inside the central fashion institutions in the 1970s and 1980s were ideologically imposed. Fashion-conscious outfits designed within the field of socialist fashion showed that the regimes had been aware of the need for change, but they continued their attempts to control it both through the state-owned women's magazines and through the inefficient and centrally organized design, production, and distribution of clothes. All the distortions that characterized socialist fashion were embodied in its conservative aesthetics: an ontological anxiety about the fluidity of time, a pathological fear of change, the hierarchical levels of decision making in planned economies, the neglect of the market, the confused relationship with Western fashion, cultural autarky, and a lack of experience informed by an earlier ideological rejection of fashion's history.



FIGURE 0.4

A Russian model at the fifth annual Contest in the Culture of Dress, held in Budapest, *Ez a divat*, Budapest (1954, nos. 5–6).

Fehér műselyemből készült estélyi ruha, áttört kézimunka díszítéssel. Szovjet modell — a szovjet kollekciót kitüntető serleggel



FIGURE 0.5

Fashion drawing, *Modeli sezona*, Moscow

(Autumn-Winter 1956–1957), cover.

Everyday Fashion

In contrast to the socialist fashion that was paraded at socialist fashion congresses, exhibited at domestic and international fairs, and presented in glossy magazines, everyday fashion existed in an alternative, unofficial modernity and conformed to a different, faster and fragmented concept of time. To a limited degree, the socialist countries had experienced a Western type of modernity for almost thirty years, which ran parallel with the official socialist modernity. During the late 1950s, the regimes abandoned harsh repression in favor of more subtle ways of controlling their citizens, and elements of Western modernity were gradually allowed to penetrate everyday life. From then on, fashion was an important intermediary between the inadequate official modernity, which took place within officialdom, and the limited Western-type modernity, which took place on an everyday level. However, fashionable clothing still could not be purchased in the shops. It was impossible to produce within the highly controlled and hierarchical socialist economic system and was also a dangerous artifact, with its variety and penchant for change, whose mere presence in the stores challenged the very essence of socialism.

Socialist consumption consisted of a set of illogical and disparate practices due to the irrationality of five-year plans and the general preference for heavy industry over consumer goods. The inefficient official markets were complemented by the activities of the black market and by networks of connections. Everyday fashion was embedded in such alternative places. People produced it themselves or acquired it through a combination of illegal and semiclandestine channels within the second societies and second economies that grew in importance in the later phases of socialism. Yet, although everyday fashion required a different concept of time and was provided through different channels, it actually existed with the regimes' discreet approval. The socialist regimes recognized new desires arising, of which fashion and dress were among the most important. In order to secure their political legitimacy, the leaderships made a series of deals with the middle classes, promising to deliver more consumer goods in exchange for political loyalty.

The promoters of everyday fashion were members of the socialist middle classes who gradually turned into a new bourgeoisie. In the later phases of socialism, when the acquisitive ambitions of the new middle classes came into play, consumption was politically legitimated in the form of a controlled and rational practice, and entered the body of approved cultural capital. From the 1960s, the socialist escalation of middle-class distinctions was established through "appropriate" consumption practices, expressed aesthetically as socialist good taste. But the middle classes wanted more. Due to improved connections with the West and easier access to information on Western fashion trends, they started to acquire another, unofficial cultural capital. While the middle classes still depended on the approved cultural capital in order to function within the official socialist modernity, unofficial cultural capital included skills for different, Western-style consumption practices, information on the latest fashions, and new lifestyles.

Moreover, these new consumerist practices, including fashionable dress as one of their most coveted items, presupposed a new concept of time that was faster and more fragmented

than the official concept. As Henri Lefebvre comments in another context, “a bitter and dark struggle around time and the use of time” went on between the regimes and their citizens (Lefebvre 2004, 74). Everyday fashion took place through a range of minor practices such as home dressmaking, services from a dressmaker, or purchases made on the black market. Ephemeral, temporal, dispersed, and rooted in the everyday, the practice of fashionable dress under socialism matches Michel de Certeau’s definition of tactics (Certeau 1988). Fashion tactics introduced the political into socialist everyday life, but in a new, dispersed way.

Everyday fashion was expressed in a range of styles. However, for women who lived under socialism, expressing their femininity was much more alluring than the latest fashion trends. While interiorizing the official concepts of conventional elegance and femininity, women rebelled against the modest levels of each that were officially endorsed. Fashionability in dress was also present, especially among the young. Paper patterns, which were regular supplements to socialist fashion magazines, demonstrated how the relationship between the desire for modern clothes and the conceptual order had its own dynamics. Through the medium of paper patterns, the regimes favored the traditional aesthetics that conformed to the rules of socialist good taste. Yet magazines occasionally ventured into a self-provided Western sartorial modernity by publishing paper patterns of the latest fashions. Promoting a faster concept of time through seasonal changes in dress, such paper patterns threatened the system, and appeared only when the regimes wanted to present themselves visually as modernist projects.

The regimes, however, were not prepared for the system of radical change in which fashion is embedded. Even when it tried to change, as shown through the practices of everyday fashion, socialism remained a closely guarded system. Organized around its ideology, socialism, just like any other hegemony, functioned to its end by defending its values and resisting its spectres. As it happened, one of these spectres was the ephemeral, eternally changing, and permanently incomplete phenomenon of fashion.