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Sustainable Fashion Practices in the Soviet Union?

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This paper addresses various research issues regarding the (non-existent) fashion industry and aspects of sustainability in meeting citizens' everyday needs in the Soviet Union. Why was the Soviet fashion industry struggling? How did the Soviet citizens acquire the necessary apparel? What sustainability ideas could be found in the society's interpretation of fashion? What can be learned from the Soviet DIY subculture? The research was done using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including the artistic research method. Researching the relationship between the Soviet worldview and fashion, one can argue that the fashion points out the bipolar disorder of the USSR system, as fashion precisely reflects what is happening in society. The next logical steps forward in the research on the topic would be a more thorough and targeted research of the DIY sustainable practices in Soviet Union.

Soviet Union, fashion, sustainability

1 Introduction

Soviet fashion industry existed in a distinctive theoretical parallel universe completely different from citizens' everyday needs and apparel. Doing research on the relationship of the Soviet world and fashion one can argue that the fashion accentuates the bipolarity of the Soviet system, as it precisely reflects what is going on in society. On the one hand, there was a fashion world with the 'houses of models' and fashion shows, boutiques, shops, but it existed in magazines, fashion spectacles abroad, and statistical data. On the other hand, private tailors, DIY, ateliers, workshops, movies, forbidden magazines and profiteers made the real living Soviet fashion.

The bipolarity of Soviet Union manifests itself even nowadays. In interviews with former Soviet citizens who were at their life's peak during Soviet times one can clearly see the dualism in answers. The answer starts with one claim, but in the middle the person suspects the canting over of the subject, corrects herself and finishes with a nice touch. On the question on the respondent's thoughts about Soviet fashion as a whole the answer was:

Soviet fashion was democratic, mostly re-sewn and handmade. Ateliers had long waiting lists, it was possible to order leather shoes and one could buy high quality leather shoes,



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not like today. And evening garments were made in such intricacy, one could enjoy them for years! (Gotsouliak 2015)

Nevertheless, Soviet Union had the largest state-owned fashion industry in world. There were working thousands of professionals, designers, constructors, artists, fashion theorists. According to planning economy there was a large-scale mass production of apparel and accessories (Gronow and Zhuravlev 2016, 10). Interestingly, the world's largest fashion industry kept fighting against materialism and recycling of old and pre-used items "from generation to generation" (Tihomirova 2015). Soviet Union was using fashion as an instrument to prove the possibility of communism in the whole world, to prove that planning economy is more capable of creating high-quality fashion for everyone than capitalism and democracy, but bureaucratic limitations and nonconformity of planning economy were imminent obstacles.

To understand the do-it-yourself mechanisms in the Soviet world it is necessary to examine the fashion industry as a whole and to inspect more closely what was happening in households. Scarcity of the garments and accessories made people apply creativity and imagination to acquire the requisites. After that, the next problem arose: how to repair the broken parts of clothing, and what to do to replace the completely broken shoes?

1.1 Methodology

The paper originates in the author's own artistic practice, as the author used some of the materials on Soviet fashion in designing her fashion collection, to conceptually solve the problems occurring in the analytical process. The model of artistic research was used: subjectively selecting geographical coverage, specific areas of interest, cross-references.

Another method used in researching for this article is historiography. The double standards and propaganda of Soviet Union must be checked with oral narratives to acquire a more complete representation as they both reveal slightly different aspects of the same symbolic reality.

The main focus is on a specific period of time and place, 1960s in Soviet Union, on what people wore and on the main events influencing the fashion. The quintessential aspect of this article is verbal narrative, interviews with people who lived in this period. Conducting interviews was necessary to prove well-known mythological narratives. There were 29 respondents of which 1 was male and 28 female respondents. The aim of the interviews was to obtain evidence about fashion, do-it-yourself ideas and sustainability in Soviet Union. It all comes down to triangulation (Gaimster 2011, 7). The research methodology in preparation of this paper included processing and analysis of the relevant literature, peer-reviewed research papers, historical books, databases, photographs, and documentaries.

2 The Great Expectations of Soviet Fashion Industry

The beginning decade of Soviet Union was conceptually different from the preceding or following decades. The first Soviet 'must-haves' – the commissar leather jacket and leather hat – were popular among male and female citizens alike (Papkova 2007). There were a lot of talented artists captivated with the idea of Communism, designers working in avant-garde and constructivist styles, with experimental and innovative ideas. The fashion itself as concept was declared a useless part of the capitalistic culture. Avant-garde fashion experiments by Vera Mukhina (fashion design and advice), Vladimir Tatlin (workers apparel), Ljubov Popova (sports apparel), Varvara Stepanova (constructivist textile patterns) were fresh, exciting, constructive and practical, designed for mass production. Their experiments were trying to merge art and everyday life (Wolfe 2013).



Figure 1. Mukhina, Vera. Sketch for everyday fashion, dress made from towels. Source: Strizhenova, T. *History of Soviet Costume, Moscow, Советский художник, 1972*

In late 1930s the first 'houses of models' started to emerge (Gronow and Zhuravlev 2007). The Moscow House of Models was the first, opened in November of 1935 (Bartlett 2010, 71). Its first printed issue in 1936 was presenting two ways of achieving the Soviet style of dress. On the one hand it was an independent and creative approach on the subject inspired by ethnographic clothing of various Soviet nations. On the other hand, there were attempts to critically analyse and reconstruct the technical elements from the Western fashion industry to produce apparel industrially (Bartlett 2010, 72).

The basis of planning economy was laid in 1930s during the stage of collectivization and nation-wide industrialization. The principles of planning economy remained invariable till the collapse of Soviet Union (Gronow and Zhuravlev 2016). The demand for apparel was rising especially in the post-war years, as people wanted to forget the horrors of war. As a result of lacking most necessary commodities during war years, expectations were high (Gronow and Zhuravlev 2016, 57). It was decided to develop new guidelines for the sector of light industry. The Stalinist myth was not familiar with such categories as 'average' or 'mediocre'. Mass production should have repeated the appearance of luxury prototypes as seen in Soviet fashion magazines (Bartlett 2010, 84). Nevertheless, the mass production was struggling till the end of 1960s because of its incapability to satisfy the basic needs of citizens (Tihomirova 2015).

The ideal of mass production was very simple: the best fashion designers from Soviet fashion houses working to create new garment designs – the best in the world. Packages of finished designs would include patterns, sizing, technical specifications, desired fabrics, buttons and fittings, which would be transferred to production factories fulfilling government orders to promptly supply the USSR with modern clothing. Government-controlled light industry would quickly eradicate old and threadbare garments, and the Soviet citizen would permanently show off in new, fashionable designer clothes. Soviet government would monitor citizens' style to become more politically correct, predictable, close to an aesthetical perfection, medicinally and climatically suitable and convenient. It would completely eradicate the desire for the fashion beyond the Iron Curtain (Bartlett 2010, 84). But this never came to be.

By the year 1948 there were fashion houses in Leningrad, Minsk, Riga and Kiev; afterwards, more than forty (40) were created, coordinated by the central All-Union House of Models in Moscow. Superior-qualification masters were trained in applied art secondary schools and light industry technical schools. Until 1960, the only two opportunities to pursue the higher education in fashion design were either the State Art Institute of Estonian SSR or the A.N. Kosygin Moscow Textile Institute (Priedola 2017).

Houses of models were supposed to be financed by mass-production industry commissioning and purchasing designs, but instead, sewing factories opted for production from existing well-known pre-

war patterns or own designs reproducing outdated and low-quality apparel (Lebina 2015). The fact that people bought out absolutely anything did not help the situation. Fashion houses operated with losses by offering the designs to factories for free, which later were used as inspiration for altering pre-war patterns 'to customize templates according to the requirements of contemporary fashion'.

The production of apparel underwent a lot of 'substitutions' affecting the quality. The garment that reached the distribution centres was reproduced in a hundred thousand copies and shared almost nothing with the fashion drawing or with the prototype designed for the textile company by the house of models (Bartlett 2010, 85). It turned out that constructing and developing specifications was one thing; it was entirely another level of complexity to tackle the production of the non-alternated prototype.

When working for production requirements, the design process was strictly regulated: even the exact amount of threads and fabric was calculated to the last millimetre. Designers should be aware of the complexity of the prototype production process. Production technology significantly limited the artist's creative ideas, as even the slightest deviation from fixed standards was not acceptable (Priedola 2017).

Fashion actually did not exist in the Soviet Union (Huber 2015) or if it did, it never reached the consumer. Terrible colours and shapes of clothing in shops, an unfortunate measurement system, the eternal deficit of goods – all the problems pointed to that (Stankevica 2015). The houses of models were lacking collaboration partners, the production industry was short of supplies and raw materials, the planning organisation was ineffective and distribution was very tardy. All the affected parties lacked feedback from the consumer: from trading and distribution, to production and to the houses of models.

It was decided to develop a collaboration between the 'ateliers of individual tailoring' and the houses of models. The collaboration between those two institutions was forming poorly. Ateliers were working under supervision of their own artist's designs, inspired by foreign fashion magazines or individual needs of the clientele; the guidelines of the house of models were not relevant (Zaharova 2007, 58). The ateliers inside the houses of models were an exception: they developed and produced the collections, organised fashion shows and received individual orders (Donskaja 1967). The Soviet citizen visited ateliers quite seldom, only for special occasions; he brought himself the fabric, fittings and buttons; the design was the result of mutual efforts, and the process was time-consuming (Maskova 2015). Thus, the atelier became a source of fashion trends not controlled by the Soviet government (Huber 2015). The process of the commission of garment was very impressive. Designer-cutter Anna Priedola shared her memories on the schedule of the process:

Receiver called upon the designer-cutter of the shift, specialized in production of such garment. Designer according to dialog with the client practically invented and draw the design. The main question was on the design of sleeves – raglan, sewn-in, kimono or combination: kimono in back, sewn-in up front. The production team consisted of designer-cutter, six sewing masters and the brigadier. The cutter worked with the USSR unified construction method – constructing patterns directly on fabric and bypassing the patternmaking process. The brigadier supervised the sewing process and evenly distributed the work according to the skills of sewing masters. The brigadier also cut the lining and batting cloth for coats and suits. Designer-cutter had to provide up to 60 coats, and each custom-made garment had to be fitted twice. Receiver also wrote the receipts and cashed in the payments for ready orders. When the order was fully paid and taken out from the atelier it was counted as finished and was recorded in the accomplished work plan (Priedola 2017).

After encountering defeat in light industry segment, houses of models became a peculiar institution of Soviet fashion. They started specializing in analysing and forecasting international fashion trends, and developing the theoretical basis of Soviet fashion, taste, wearing instructions and propaganda

(Zaharova 2007, 60). There was a small amount of fashion design and patternmaking for individual sewing as well. The head protocol remained intact: not to copy designs from international fashion magazines, but to develop own models by interweaving the artist's idea with skills of patternmaking and modern production technology (Gronow and Zhuravlev 2007).

The idea of mass production of affordable clothing and furniture a.k.a. 'fast fashion' emerged all over the world almost concurrently. Mass production in the Soviet Union started around mid-1930s. In capitalist countries, the first fast-fashion label H&M was founded on 4 October 1947, and the first affordable furniture brand IKEA appeared in 1943. Curiously, both brands originated in Sweden. Comparing state-funded and private-capital mass production – one in a totalitarian regime and another in a democracy – it is obvious that a utopian (in this case rather a dystopian) vision can flourish in a free society: H&M and its followers are still thriving in the global mass market today.

Confronting the Soviet Union's fashion industry with Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum, one could see an obvious resemblance between them. The fashion industry seemed real from the distance, but when looking closely, it was nothing more than a weird construction replacing reality with its representation.

3 The Hunting and Gathering for the Necessary Apparel

Nevertheless, Soviet citizens felt the need to be dressed in something, preferably in clothing which preserved their self-respect – not necessarily up to date or trendy. The greater part of apparel was home-made: sewn or knitted by hand, including restoring, mending and re-sewing.

During the interviews on Soviet fashion respondents dwelt on the topic of gathering the necessary apparel. 66 percent remembered the purchase of fabrics, materials and patterns, 62 percent were purchasing ready-to-wear garments in shops. Significant part of women, 42 percent, were ordering some apparel in ateliers. Divided equally in three groups – 15 percent each, respondents remembered sewing themselves, commissioning the work to private sewing masters, or re-sewing ready garments at special ateliers or themselves.

For example, one of the respondents remembered her mother sewing everything: "All the clothes were sewn by my mommy and I was humble and grateful for it. I regret I haven't learned the skills from my mommy. It was hard to get good fabric and all the patterns were inherited from my mommy's mommy" (Cekula 2015). 28 percent of all were buying clothing and accessories by '*blat*' (illegal and corrupt deals) or in 'commission' (second-hand) shops. Houses of models were a less popular place to gather the apparel – only 14 percent, as well as dealing with '*fartsovshiki*' (purchasing foreign or rare items illegally from private persons) – 7 percent.

Analysing the acquired data, one could construct a few theories. The numbers have a distinct value, even excluding the subjectivisms and unreliability of memories. The free form of questions and the time distance, separating the interview from the researched time period, allow choosing the desired answer, the most 'appropriate' one. To eliminate such pattern, the questionnaire repeatedly included questions on the particular subjects phrased differently.

Which activities remained in memory the most: purchasing the fabric or sewing by themselves? Maybe it was the visit to the ready-to-wear shop? Or the visit to the private sewing master? Today's perspective gives only a vague idea of the reality of situations. Many of the respondents remembered small and intricate parts of attire such as "tennis shoes must be chalked so white they emitted white dust clouds when walking" (Buravcova 2015) or special materials, textures or prints such as "light moss-green coloured half-knee high boots with silver hardware and lace-up details along the front and greyish-white rough wool fabric long sleeved and closed-cut coat-dress with black spots, metallic belt and brooch" (Stankevica 2015).

The answers point out that the practice of sewing themselves or visiting the sewing masters was more widespread in the researched time period than it is today. It is clear that there was a

completely different retail typology, not based on business, but more similar to distribution stations. All the fabric production, distribution, apparel production economy and logistics were different in the planning economy.

The researched time period belongs to the industrialisation era of the Soviet Union, the boom of mass production. In combination with Soviet unitary controlled economy and its 'distribution' structures there were forming peculiar, economically absurd situations – low quality, deficit, illogically expensive or cheap items, limited supply or unexpected supply overflow of products of one sort ('the end of the month' phenomenon), etc.

The tradition to sew clothes themselves belongs to the beginning of the industrialisation and it would be well-founded to assume that in the research period it was declining. In 1950s – 60s sewing was the necessity of life, as undeveloped Soviet economy in post-war time could not manage the rising demand. 1970s came with certain 'abundance' of ready-made clothing, and individual sewing and ateliers services started to become more specialized and expensive.

Thus, it is possible that generalized and subjective memoirs of hunting and gathering have been constructed in opposition to 'today': the conditions of the last 20 years. Acquiring the apparel as well as food, or renovation of home, is only one of the many possible dimensions to remember from one's youth.

It is important to distinguish the phenomenon of the culture and guidelines of appropriate attire for the Soviet citizen. The topic had been discussed constantly in schools, in work meetings and in media. Those who did not fall under the authorized guidelines of allowed style were severely criticized (Briede 2015). Every book about sewing or knitting techniques contained introductory section to strengthen the morality of Soviet citizens, and to develop the appropriate taste. The women's magazines in Soviet Union were not about fashion or housekeeping, or even advisory. There were articles mostly about the life and thoughts of V.I. Lenin and party members, some propagandistic and moralizing stories and reports from factories or united farms. Two or three pages were dedicated to children and 'kitchen', questions of hygiene and nutrition, and quarterly pattern attachments (Padomju Latvijas Sieviete 1960, 18-22). Soviet women's magazines also contained small fashion-trends and taste sections discussing the correct length, fitting and neckline for garments (Ozola 2015). The housekeeping guide contained a special section on the topic of the culture of clothing (Latvijas valsts izdevniecība 1961, 483). The section on clothing of the Small Encyclopaedia of Latvian SSR addresses the subjects of 'moderation' and 'suitability' levels (Latvijas PSR Mazā enciklopēdija 1967).

The tasteful and sophisticated Soviet woman was fitting in the guidelines of 'suitability', 'simplicity', 'grace', 'modesty' and 'sense of measure' (Lobina 1958, 20-21). 'Moderation' was necessary to maintain in hairstyles, make-up and accessories. The Soviet standard of beauty was a clean, open face with pinned up wavy hair, no make-up, but with a sense of happiness.



Figure 2. The cover of Soviet women's magazine Работница (Rabotnitsa). January, 1957

The dream professions of such women are milkmaid, locksmith or truck driver. Intricate and expensive jewellery, furs and make-up were not appropriate for humble Soviet citizens (Lobina 1958, 21).

Gender inequality and stereotypes were a huge issue in Soviet Union (Hetherington 2015, 436). It is no coincidence that only male respondent agreed to be interviewed for this research. Emphasizing the gender inequality, the sole male respondent was referring to fashion topic as strictly 'female business'. The question about flashy and tasteless side of Soviet citizens' sense of style was answered as "not judging people by their clothes" (Lubarskij 2015), and by far one of the longest answers. Other answers rather contained as few words as necessary to reply on the subject.

People living in the Soviet regime often sought comfort in food, clothing, friendships, family, 'little' things, and alcohol. Peace and comfort were provided in soft flannel house-coats worn with warm woollen cardigans. There was the so-called home dress - very popular Soviet soft flannel (or cotton muslin for summer) wrap dresses with bright floral prints. Outstanding contrast was achieved by the LIFE magazine photographer Howard Sochurek, who was taking pictures of the first Dior fashion show models walking in Moscow streets in 1957. Soviet people and French models interacted with each other, and facial expressions of citizens show confusion and astonishment simultaneously.

The garment's length and openness was strictly regulated – whether it was a dress, skirt or costume, no shorter than 5 cm below kneecap. Armholes in summer and evening dresses had to fit tightly around the armpit joint, small sleeves or 'wings', miniature décolletage were more preferable (Padomju Latvijas Sieviete 1960, 22). Pants or pant suits were not appropriate for women, nylon stockings were frowned upon, as well as tight-fitting and shape-accentuating dresses and high heels (Adamoviča 2015).

The subject of bipolarity of the USSR is most pointedly addressed by the respondent Vēsma Vilka:

I can only say, the sewing ateliers (for the people) and houses of models were two parallel universes. Models were to emphasize the greatness of the Soviet Union (although then it was referred to differently), not made for ready-to-wear. Even though neither public nor private transportation was suitable for getting anywhere in those garments (Vilka 2015).

Fashion industry and mass production in planning economy could essentially be a utopian idea, utterly impossible. Fashion cannot exist in a totalitarian regime as it expresses the individuality, zeitgeist and freedom. For comparison – the Italian fashion industry during Fascist regime was structured bilaterally, where both directions were diametrically opposed. From one side – the Fascist order, instructions, behaviour and style, from the other – freedom for individuality and own sense of style. Both of the opposite mechanisms coexisted throughout the regime (Pauicelli 2004, 4). To compare the Italian experience with the Soviet Union's – the Soviet regime existed for a much longer period of time, it was more repressive with millions of victims, but was not as thorough or methodical as Fascism.

4 'Zero' Society

Today sustainability and recycling practices are honoured in the society, 'green thinking' approach encouraged and taught in schools; for instance, the elegant and modern garment repair 'Clevercare' videos by Stella McCartney sustainable luxury brand are rather popular on YouTube. Sweden is ranked the most sustainable country in world (RobecoSAM AG 2015), which paradoxically invites parallels with the pattern of the Soviet Union: having a mass production industry and sustainability seedlings at the same time. However, recycling in Soviet Union was a necessity and a habit to be concealed, rather than touted, and its motives were not ecological or environmental thinking (Tihomirova 2015).

It was possible to remake the garments in specific 'ateliers for garments repairing and re-sewing' (Gurova 2006, 97). The citizen could make a new garment from two or more used ones, or from a combination of what was available (Redina 2015), "make a two-piece costume from an old coat, or a garment made from re-sewing the inside out" (Gotsouliak 2015). Other interesting services included cutting out the old and threadbare parts and replacing them with other fabric, or fabric gathered from edges and the inside parts of the clothing. (Indeed, such practice was described as early as 1840s by Nikolai Gogol in his short story 'The Overcoat'.)

Before the technological process, additional work had to be done – laying out, cleaning, hydrothermal processing. It was very common to partially renew the garment by canting some details, but leaving pockets, the frontal details and plackets intact. Decorative or complementary fabrics were used to make the garment a few sizes bigger or smaller, more up-to-date, or to replace the wilted and outworn collars, cuffs, fastenings and pockets. Māra Kapče in her tutorial for the light industry technical schools teaches how to invisibly mend clothes:

The patch is cut out from the same fabric as broken garment as a square. The thread has to be pulled out from all the edges approximately 0,5 – 0,7 cm width. The frills of the patch then must be drawn into the left side of the master fabric with a specific needle and secured with a fusible (Kapče 1980, 232)

Soviet government supported the do-it-yourself subculture (Huber 2015) by organizing special sewing and construction training courses for adults, issuing self-tutoring guides on the subject, and inventing housekeeping lessons for girls in schools (while at the same time boys were attending 'labour training' lessons). Meanwhile, the houses of models were analysing Soviet peoples' obsession with cinema, actors and everything 'foreign' and intervened with magazine articles on propagandistic and sometimes advisory topics.

The sewing practices were passed on from generation to generation just like the pre-war Singer sewing machines which became very dear to their users (Tihomirova 2015). The houses of models were integrating their creative potential even in the DIY segment by reproducing elementary models and patterns which were easy to create without specific technologies (Huber 2015). The models and patterns in Soviet magazines were not always corresponding correctly: sometimes the drawing model and pattern in the section 'Let's make it ourselves!' was simply filling the empty space (Balode 1961). The hand-making and DIY field of interest was under supervision of the houses of models. It was the beginning of the distinctive do-it-yourself subculture in Soviet citizens' everyday life. The culture scholar Olga Vainstein describes the private sewing masters as "an unique women's self-modelling gender sphere, which helped a lot of women not only to develop their own dressing style, but also to create the unique symbolic space, their own subculture" (Huber 2015).

Of the abundance of sustainable practices, the most charming one was borrowing garments from friends for dates or special events. The friendships started in schools, institutes or workplaces lasted a lifetime, friends were together 'in sickness and in health'. One could borrow anything from a friend – even, if necessary, quite large sums of money (Gotsouliak 2015).

Other remarkable up-cycling and re-cycling activities were done at home or with help from private sewing masters. Interview respondents remembered a lot of sustainable and zero-waste activities. People were re-sewing easiest parts of clothing, sewing-in or letting out seams and length, decorated or altered old garments with new appliques, collars, crochets, buttons, laces or frills. Wedges were sewn into armholes of dresses or as decor in trousers, dresses and skirts.

It was an ideal example of a zero waste society – everything could be useful in Soviet Union. Soviet citizens were not quick to throw out garbage. The monthly magazine 'Наука и Жизнь' (Nauka i Zhizn, Science and Life) provided advice from professionals, and readers themselves could send in their ideas and inventions under the sections 'Tips for Master at Home' or 'Small Artifices'. For outsiders of USSR it looked like advice for those in complete poverty. In reality the magazine was

popular among people with higher and technical education. The main idea was not to throw out anything, as it can be useful to repair other worn-out clothes or broken items. There were a lot of tips on how to repair zippers. The plastic zippers were found only on imported goods, so no-one could replace the broken plastic zipper as they were not produced in the Soviet Union. Readers and engineers advised other readers on how to intricately sew back the broken parts or how to glue a zipper, or even to attach a small loop to prevent the constant opening of a worn-out zipper.

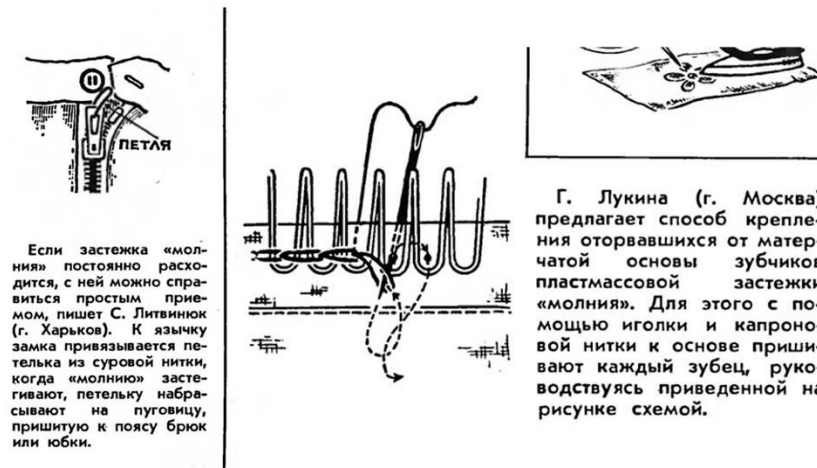


Figure 3. How to repair broken zipper. *Tips for Master at Home*. 'Наука и Жизнь' (Nauka i Zhizn, Science and Life). 1979

The use of adhesives was very popular in households. People used glue to repair zippers, fittings and press-buttons, as well as to repair worn-out bottom edges of trousers and jeans.

As it was hard and sometimes impossible to buy the necessary fabrics, women used old clothes, husbands' clothes, curtains, napkins, towels, blankets, carpets, or table-cloths for re-sewing and up-cycling purposes. "My mother made a tote for everyday purchases by sewing together a lot of garters", said one respondent (Veilande 2017). It was popular to gather yarns from unpicking old sweaters, socks, pillows, knitted or crocheted blankets etc. Sometimes one could purchase raw wool or non-dyed yarns. The yarns were soaked and washed in bathtubs, hand-dyed, and rolled in clews (Buravcova 2015). In the article 'Updates from Old Jersey and Knitwear' by Rogozina and Khrushcheva one can be blown away by creativity level of the authors. The paragraph described the making process of the yarn 'White Birch'.

Unpicked machine-knitted garment's yarn is very thin and for hand-knitting purposes it is important to roll in three or four threads. For the yarn 'White Birch' 29 – 30 lengths of white, light-grey or pale-yellow and one length black thread is required. The black thread must be 3-4 times thicker than light ones (Rogozina and Khrushcheva 1979, 297).

Comparing the Soviet Union's do-it-yourself and other sustainability practices to the terms contemporary meaning and purpose, Soviet practices have more to do with the war-time culture of scarcity, as people were ashamed of their repaired and re-sewn garments. Nowadays re-cycling and upcycling are widely accepted and praised practices in the West, motivated by care for the biosphere and the virtue of frugality rather than need.

5 Conclusion

The fashion as well as all other aspects of Soviet citizens' daily life was balancing between two parallel systems of ethics: the double-hearted strategies for surviving in the Soviet regime, and the

value of deep and meaningful relationships between friends, family and colleagues. This finding is strongly evident in oral narratives obtained through interviews for this paper.

The ultimate struggle of Soviet fashion industry was brought on by planning economy, censorship and limitations of bureaucracy, lacking of collaboration and organisational hierarchy in decision making, and chaos in supply chain and distribution. It does not matter how big, powerful and well educated the industry was – with no freedom, it is impossible to explore the depths of creation.

However, real inventiveness can be found in Soviet citizens' pursuit of clothing and accessories. The greater part of apparel was home-made: sewn or knitted by hand, including restoring, mending and re-sewing (the most intriguing part of all). The rest came from private sewing masters, ateliers, shops, commission (second-hand) shops and illegal purchasing of foreign clothing and accessories. DIY subculture in Soviet Union was a quiet organisation, not manifesting its resourcefulness and creativity as mending and re-sewing practises were to be ashamed of (as confirmed in the interviews). It would make an excellent example of a zero-waste society today: everything is useful, everything can be repaired.

Was there sustainability in fashion in the Soviet Union? If anything, Soviet economic system with its seemingly infinite resources, 'cheap' oil and gas, plentiful labour and gigantic landmass, was one of the most wasteful ones known to man. Even while they designed and launched space rockets, the Soviets were unable to supply their citizens with decent shoes – not dissimilar to what we are seeing in our own time in North Korea.

The sustainable fashion in Soviet Union emerged not from the love of the planet, but from its exact opposite – this legendary sloppiness and wastefulness, which left the 'consumer sector' short of textiles and wearable clothing, as well as most other goods.

The research demonstrates that it is useful to cross-check oral narratives with written and visual sources, as they can be biased by propaganda and the transitory nature of memory.

The next logical steps forward in the research on the topic would be a more thorough and targeted research of the DIY sustainable practices in Soviet Union. This rich and yet unexplored layer of resources can serve as inspiration to contemporary designers and artists in shaping the future of sustainable fashion.

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