



# Comparing Fashions of the Cold War

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## Abstract

This project examines the differences in fashion and clothing in the Soviet Union and in the United States during the Cold War until dissolution of the Soviet Union. The fashions and clothing worn by the average citizens of both nations were in part determined by their respective culture, ideology, and politics.

## Soviet Fashion in the Cold War

In the West, Soviet clothing is often imagined to consist of ragged uniformity, or a fur cap and a military coat. However, in reality the average Soviet citizen did have a fair range of choice in what they could wear, and like in the United States and the West, a culture around clothing developed. Under Stalin, Soviet fashion was indeed close to the expectation, largely due to scarcity and instability brought on by the chaos of the Second World War. Djurdja Bartlett notes that after Stalin's death however, fashion grew in importance in Soviet culture, due largely to the Khrushchev Thaw and the secretary's reforms towards travel, which allowed western influences to seep into the USSR.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Brezhnev came into power, domestic goods were a major concern for the party, and he promised to increase both the quantity and quality of domestically-produced clothing. Production duty increased, and for the first time since the revolution many stores' shelves were full. Customers had become consumers and began to look for items of higher quality. Natalya Chernyshova notes that with Brezhnev also came "developed socialism" which encouraged a "cultured" citizenry, while linking material abundance with communism itself.<sup>2</sup>

Being fashionable was now something to which many citizens could aspire, even while the state still did not support hunting for fashions. Imported goods from Soviet allies and from the rest of Europe sold exceptionally well in major cities, along with a thriving black market. Chernyshova also points out that in 1973 Soviet manufacturers even began producing jeans.<sup>3</sup> These same fashionable ideas would remain a constant through the Brezhnev era, only growing through Gorbachev's time as the leader of the USSR, and with the Soviet economy at its knees, fashionable clothes became far rarer, and shortages returned.

[1] Bartlett, Djurdja. *Fashion East: The Spectre that Haunted Socialism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010. Print.  
Web. 04 Apr. 2014.  
[2] Chernyshova, Natalya. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.  
[3] Chernyshova, Natalya. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.



Soviet "Silyagi" (Lit. style hunters) as recreated in the 2008 film *Silyagi*. Silyagi were a youth movement in the late 1940s and 50s, embracing Rock N' Roll, and colorful dress.  
Dir. Todorovskiy, Valery. Red Arrow, 2008. Film



Demonstration of Fashions at Moscow's House of Fashion in 1972.  
Akhomov, V. *Demonstration of Seasonal Fashions, 1972*. FotoSoyuz. Chernyshova, Natalya. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. 142. Ebook Library. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.



Marylyn Monroe and Jane Russell, in 1950s formalwear  
Marylyn Monroe and Jane Russell at the Chinese Theater, 1953. UCLA Library. Los Angeles: UCLA Library. Web 10 Apr 2014.



An advertisement for bell bottom jeans, popular in the United States from the 1960s into the 70s.  
-h.i.s. Bell Bottom Jeans. Advertisement n.p. n.d. Print.



French Dior models visiting Moscow in 1959, an example of Western influences in fashion reaching the Soviet Union.  
Scharak, Howard. Dior in Moscow 1959. Life Magazine. LIFE photo archive. Google. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.



Hippie Fashion at a glance, hippie influences spread worldwide, including the USSR.

Perugini, William. "Hippies Dancing on a Country Road." Photograph. "Voucher school history book" americablog 3 Mar 2013. Web. 9 Apr 2014.

## American Fashion in the Cold War

By the end of the Second World War, the United States was already a major player in the world of fashion, yet the consumerism that is now intrinsic to fashion was in its infancy at the start of the Cold War. In fact, synthetic textile advances were being made by many of the same corporations involved in the military industrial complex. For example, as Jane Pavitt writes, "Dupont, who had pioneered the development of nylon from the 1930s onwards, was also engaged in research into plutonium for the Manhattan Project."<sup>1</sup> Affordable synthetic clothing could now be made in abundance, allowing fashion to become far more widely available. While the Soviet Union and its allies did produce their own nylon substitutes, disposability would come with these substitutes.

The 1960s also brought the rise of counter-culture bringing new fashions such as the tie-die shirt, while at the same time being a stand against the status quo. In particular they stood against the consumerism that had developed in the United States. At the end of the Cold War, the United States held a premium on the culture around clothing: its styles would spread around the world, and even cross the Iron curtain.

[1] Pavitt, Jane. *Fear and Fashion in the Cold War*. Ann Arbor: V&A, and the University of Michigan, 2009. Print.

## Comparison & Conclusion

On the surface the socialist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States should have few similarities in regards to clothing. Yet in reality they often did, just as American consumers would reject a low quality item, Soviet consumers did the same, even considering the likelihood that quality goods may be unavailable. With the oil boom of the 1970s the Soviet Union was able to import better quality goods from abroad, while national production often went unpurchased in favor of these imported goods from outside the USSR.<sup>1</sup> The culture that developed around clothing as such became quite similar, despite of the two nations being opposites politically.

Finally, the fashions themselves were a trait that would become shared among the West and the East. Chernyshova notes that Russian ethnic prints that were pushed in propaganda in the Soviet Union managed to become popular in the West, while at the same time, a strong, far-reaching black market formed in the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Jeans in particular became massively successful in the Soviet Union, just as they were in the West.<sup>3</sup> For all their differences, the two developed a sense of fashion that was not as far apart as one might think. In the West disposability even resulted in a short-lived trend for paper clothes, as Pavitt writes.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, disposability in the Soviet Union however, was more a concern about quality, rather than literally throwing away clothes, instead millions of rubles worth of clothes would end up sitting in warehouses or on shelves.<sup>5</sup>

[1] Chernyshova, Natalya. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.  
[2] Chernyshova, Natalya. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.  
[3] Chernyshova, Natalya. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013. Ebook Library. Web. 04 Apr. 2014.  
[4] Pavitt, Jane. *Fear and Fashion in the Cold War*. Ann Arbor: V&A, and the University of Michigan, 2009. Print.

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