

A Waft of Miss Dior in Moscow: In Defense of Haute Couture in the Soviet Fashion Scene

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ABSTRACT

This study will illustrate the cultural background and implications behind the first Dior show in 1959 in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, led by Nikita Khrushchev, and argue how Dior was the ideal candidate to transform the Soviet fashion scene compared to other Western fashion brands. On the surface, one may presume that the economic nature of the socialist state and Khrushchev inviting Dior, one of the most exclusive, capitalist brands to this day, contradict each other. In response to such a misconception, I will defend how the show in fact suited the host's grander plan: paving the way for the "Thaw" of Russia in the period between 1955 and 1964, after Stalin's death. Christian Dior, the father of postwar French couture, strived to revive the glory of French fashion before WWII. His artistic vision had shaped the Soviet fashion scene and inspired its numerous designers even before the show. I will also clarify misunderstandings that Dior had ties with the Nazi regime and that his ultra-feminine aesthetics in "New Look" conflicted with feminism. Overall, both the media and the Soviet public welcomed the show with enthusiasm. The journalists from the U.S. were especially in favor of Western influence, which changed the previously conservative standards of Soviet fashion.

Introduction



Figure 1. Note. From “Dior Comes to Moscow: Tracing the Threads of Haute Couture in the Soviet Union,” by Sophie Hardie, 2020.

In 1959, Dior, one of the most coveted luxury fashion brands, hosting a show in Moscow at the height of the Cold War may have seemed an improper social and political choice. At the Soviet officials’ request, the house of Christian Dior, a French fashion house known for its haute couture, ready-to-wear, fragrances, and cosmetics, displayed over 120 outfits to over 11,000 Soviet spectators in Moscow for over a week (Bronner, 2021). The first of its kind in the city since Russian socialism was established, the show drew a lot of both local and international attention. Fashion, due to its visual aspect, is inevitably linked to expressing wealth and social class. Ostensibly, the discrepancy between the fashion show promoting extravagant clothing and its location—the “epicenter” of the communist agenda—is stark (p. 2). Many will call into question how Christian Dior, one of the most renowned luxury labels in the world at the time, was invited in the first place.

However, this show served as a part of the de-Stalinization process led by Nikita Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Communist Party and premier of the Soviet Union (Gibney, 2024). Originally founded by Christian Dior himself and eventually taken over by his protege Yves Saint Laurent, Dior promoted an extravagant ultra-feminine aesthetic that displayed a traditional form of gender presentation, contradicting the “hygienic” aesthetic that the Soviets had been promoting for years (Gurova, 2009, p. 73-91). Despite these contradictions, the Dior show in Moscow highlighted the changes Khrushchev was bringing to the Soviet planned economy (Bronner, 2021). Commencing the “thaw,” he opened up international trade and gave the public access to foreign media. Besides this show, the Soviet Union also hosted a series of international exhibitions, including the American National Exhibition, which propelled cultural exchange and the beginning of “peaceful competition.” These events might appear incongruous with the socialist ideals of the Soviet Union at first glance, but this view overlooks the larger, more complicated picture.

Fashion as a Strategic Move for De-Stalinization

While post-Tsarist Russia operated under the socialist regime, remnants of the previous class system led to the divide between the rich and poor in fashion consumption. These conflicts between the Soviet political elite and bourgeoisie over what role fashion should play in society and the government’s intervention in response characterized the fashion landscape in the Soviet Union (Bronner, 2021). Over the years, the state wished to reformulate the concept of fashion by “civilizing and bringing culture to relatively uncultured social classes” (Gurova, 2009, p. 73-91, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 8). The state strived to establish a fashion bureau to create trends that could bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

This goal, however, encountered an obstacle: the remains of the Tsarist rule, in which the concept of luxury fashion was relevant. (Ruane, 1996). At the beginning of Russia’s transition to socialism, the government consistently displayed its “planned ideals,” creating a style fit for the lower and middle classes that overthrew the upper class (Gronow & Zhuravlev, 2015; Bronner, 2021, p. 7). This style embodied the Foucauldian framework—“Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization”—overthrowing the concept of “fashion” by prioritizing functionality over aesthetics and holding the mission of creating visual equality across professions, ages, and genders (Klingseis, 2011, p. 84-115, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 9). Ideally, this would eliminate the competition over who the best dresser is. Magazines such as *Rabotnitsa* (“The Woman Worker” in Russian) were used to promote such ideals (Meek, 1952). One of the excerpts translated by Katharina Kingseis shows an example:

Our “fashion” ought to be plain, comfortable, easy to accomplish, inexpensive, affordable to the woman worker and, above all, meet the requirements of clothing in general, i.e. protect people from cold, dust and mud, etc., while remaining elegant. (Klingseis, 2011, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 9-10)



Figure 2. Note. From 1923 Issue of *Rabotnitsa* (Working Woman).

These objectives began faltering under the New Economic Policy, which granted few “NEPmen” economic prosperity. It allowed them to consume luxury fashion that was still inaccessible to the rest, so “hostile remnants from the class society” of the Tsarist government began to resurface (Gronow & Zhuravlev, 2015, p. 41-43, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 10). At the same time, the working class, or “repair society,” had to make and repair their own clothes since they were unable to “make a fashionable coat when the only fabric available is a piece of coarse felt used to make military overcoats” (Gurova, 2009, p. 73-91; Stolyarova, 2023, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 10). Yet, despite its initially unsuccessful efforts, the government kept on pushing to establish a fashion bureau, directly influencing fashion at the time. It continued to promote the idea of a clean look, by replacing the words fashion and beauty with “hygienic” instead. This term did not refer to literal hygiene, such as sanitary conditions, but “correspond[ed] to the conditions of comfort, beauty, and durability.” (Zaitsev, 1982, translated by Klingseis, 2011, p. 84-115, as cited in Bronner, 2011, p. 10-11). Fashion trends were created by the government-backed fashion house, the Center for the Creation of New Soviet Dress, later named the Fashion Atelier of the Moscow House of Fashion Design (Bronner, 2021). “In addition to design institutes and fashion ateliers,” the ministries initiated “a great number of scientific institutes and laboratories that laid the foundation for the design and construction of clothes.” (Gronow & Zhuravlev, 2010). This new fashion that would serve the New Woman incorporated the aesthetics of the geometric design principles of Cubism to deliver the concept of modernity (Bronner, 2021).

Eventually, in the 1930s, during his five-year plan, Stalin shifted his focus toward developing industries that propelled material prosperity, including fashion, to appeal to the growing middle class (Klingseis, 2011, as cited in Bronner, 2021). Ultimately, the government-enforced fashion plans did not last long, as a worker-enforced political campaign against the Westernization of the Soviet Union broke out in 1949 (Gronow & Zhuravlev, 2015, as cited in Bronner, 2021). Regardless of the plans, the “proletarian reality” had settled in, leading to the government making constant efforts to bridge this gap (Bronner, 2021, p. 7). This continued conflict between the Soviet elite, Bourgeois, and the government over the role and aesthetics of fashion demonstrates that fashion was still relevant back then. In other words, while one may assert that the topic of fashion was inconsequential in a socialist state, arguing that the nature of fashion that creates visual differences among people went against the socialist ideology of equality and abolishing class differentiation, history tells us otherwise.

The opening up of the Soviet Union to the international fashion market may also seem contradictory to the socialist ideals of minimal competition and government-controlled enterprises. Yet, this was not the case,

as Khrushchev ensured that the “opening up” was done in a censored manner. During the thaw, he began to enable cultural contact with the West as a part of his foreign policy (Gronow & Zhuravlev, 2015). His goal was to achieve peaceful coexistence with the United States and its allies, which contrasted with Stalin’s policies.

Nearly a decade and a half has elapsed since the long literary “freeze” occasioned by Stalinist censorship. Since then, a body of prose has appeared—either in the Soviet literary journals or manuscripts smuggled to the West—which, for the boldness of content and variety of technique, may rival the protest and experiment of the symbolists and various “fellow travelers” writing in the twenties. (Rogers, 1968, p. 198-207)

To begin with, fashion was encouraged by the state because it was one of the ways the Soviets could assert themselves in “peaceful competition with the West” (Bronner, 2021, p. 13). Fashion was a “symbolic manipulation” that replaced the violent and totalitarian control of Stalin’s rule by satisfying people with “ex-bourgeoisie elements such as fashion, glamor, luxury, coziness, and pleasure” (Gurova, 2009, p. 3-4, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 13). Furthermore, while the regime promoted the expansion of the fashion industry, it did not want the ex-bourgeoisie traditions to make a full comeback, especially not the “degenerate Western fashion” (Klingseis, 2011, p. 84-115, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 14). To prevent this, the government reincarnated the word “hygiene” from the 1920s to describe fashion practices. Once again, the virtues of “simplicity,” “practicality,” and “modesty” were emphasized, leading to fashion being dictated by gender norms once again. The interest in fashion by the public at the time was also reflected in the popularization of fashion magazines. These new publications were targeted toward women and subcategorized their audience based on their roles in society: *Rabotnitsa* (Working Woman), *Krest’ianka* (Peasant Woman), *Sovetskaia Zhenshchina* (Soviet Woman), along with other magazines about the construction of garments such as *Modelu Sezona* (Fashions of the Season) and *Zhural Mod* (Magazines of Fashions) (Gurova, 2008, as cited in Bronner, 2021).

Based on the translated text of *Rabotnitsa* 3 from 1958, Klingseis (2011) points out that the individuality mentioned here was quite different from the individuality we know today, while it did display that the “uniform” dress was no longer relevant.

How young women ought to dress . . . Your wardrobe should reflect individuality, taking fashion into account without imitating it blindly . . . It is not recommendable for a young woman to dress too “fashionably,” flamboyantly, garishly, attracting everybody’s attention in the street. And it is always nice to see a young woman dressed elegantly, comfortably, simply, and harmonically. (p. 84-115, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 14)

However, despite this newly granted freedom, the government still banned some elements of Western fashion, such as bright colors that resembled the colors of a rebel group (Gurova, 2009, as cited in Bronner, 2021). It also established the department store GUM in Moscow to control which designers could enter the Soviet fashion scene and showcase their works (Gronow & Zhuravlev, 2021). By balancing freedom and censorship, the Soviet government under Khrushchev’s rule successfully utilized the fashion industry as a strategic move toward de-Stalinization.

Christian Dior: Artist and Father of Postwar French Couture



Figure 3. A photo taken in 1957 at the Dior Couture Salon. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

One may question why the anti-capitalist Soviet officials chose to host one of the most capitalist brands for a public fashion show. Yet, regardless of its capitalistic nature, Dior was the most elite brand at the time. The state inviting Dior created an opportunity to proclaim its highly cultural and artistic taste that would influence Soviet fashion. Dior was also renowned for being “artistic”: in his autobiography, Christian Dior recognized himself as an artist, yet one who simply knew how to market (2018). Aside from his own words, Dior’s artistic drive was reflected in his original ambition of founding an “avant-garde gallery with a friend, Jacques Bonjean,” where he showcased works by “emerging artists including Max Jacob and Christian Bérard, alongside more established modern masters such as Picasso, Matisse, and Duffy” (Picardie, 2022, p. 27). However, this all fell apart soon after his father Maurice Dior’s bankruptcy. He joined another gallerist friend, Pierre Colle, in giving Alberto Giacometti his first-ever solo show in Paris and championing Salvador Dalí with a series of notable exhibitions. But despite the prescience of their aesthetic choices, Colle and Dior had little commercial success; for example, Dalí’s masterpiece *The Persistence of Memory* was sold for a modest \$250.

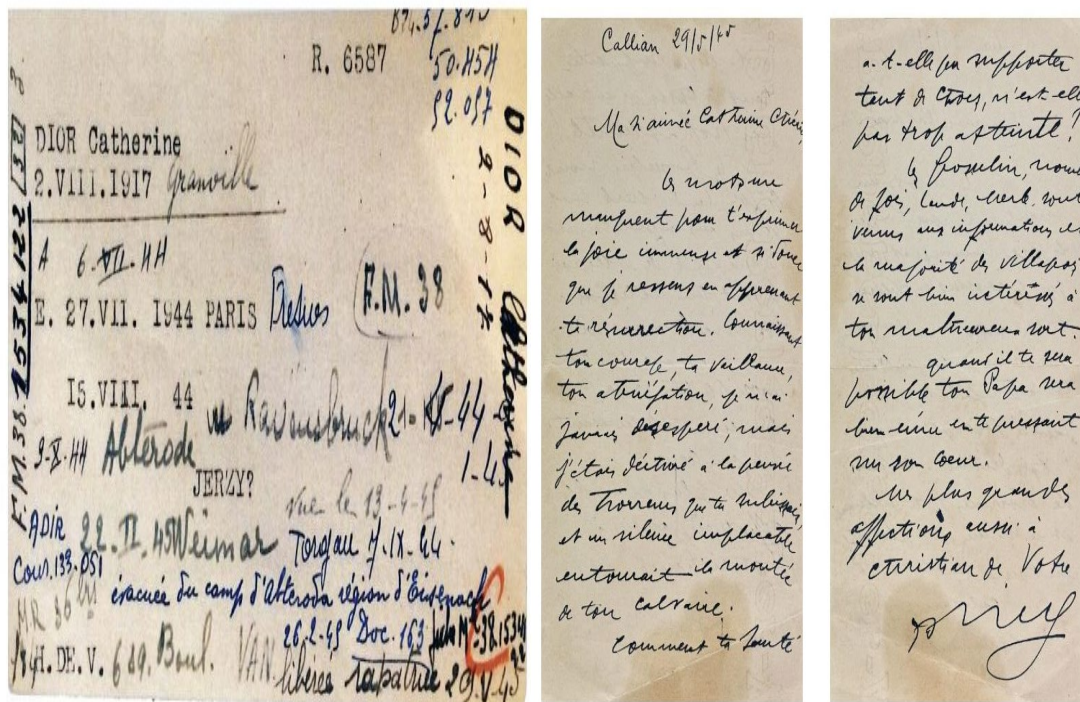


Figure 4. Salvador Dali. (1931). *The Persistence of Memory*.

After his gallery days were cut short, Dior taught himself how to draw, specifically fashion illustrations for magazines. By selling his illustrations, he could earn money and eventually, with his younger sister Catherine as his first muse and model, he began to design clothes, creating the fashion brand Dior.

Figure 6 & 7. Initial designs for the Miss Dior Fragrance. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

In addition, Dior had an iron fist over the global fashion market due to its licensed fragrances that had taken over the small-luxury market. At his debut fashion show, Dior ordered the Maison to be “sprayed throughout with the scent of Miss Dior” (Picardie, 2022, p. 269). He dedicated this scent to his sister Catherine, a member of the French Resistance network F2 during WWII, who had recently managed to make it back from Ravensbrück alive without betraying a single one of her comrades. Though the creation of his fragrance started innocently as Christian being “the tender brother who could not forget his sister's suffering and sacrifice” and “creating the floral scent of Miss Dior inspired by Catherine, that still survives as a timeless tribute to the tenderness of Christian's love for his sister” (Picardie, 2022, p. 249).



(Left) **Figure 8.** Catherine Dior’s deportation files. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

(Right) **Figure 9.** Maurice Dior’s letter to Catherine after her return. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

Miss Dior became one of the main factors that granted the House of Dior its status as an international brand, as women of all social classes bought into the fantasy Dior was selling by purchasing (Parkins, 2012). Ultimately, Dior made up a significant portion of both French fashion and general exports. Interested in this influence, the Soviet government sponsored a trip to France for designers whose mission was to “extract ‘useful benefits’” from the infamous House of Dior and bring them back to the Soviet clothing production (RGANI, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 23). Therefore, while some may claim it was obscene for the Soviet officials, who most vehemently opposed Western capitalism, to strike a deal with one of the most commercially recognized fashion houses at the time, this claim is flawed: Dior’s reputation as an artistic couture house created an opportunity for the Soviet government to publicly assert high cultural taste that will influence Soviet fashion.

“New Look”: Dior’s Ultra-Feminine Aesthetics and Women’s Liberation



Figure 10. The Dior “New Look” that became the basis of the Dior aesthetic. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

Though its extravagant and ultra-feminine aesthetic originated from the “New Look” and the Soviet ideals may seem conflicting, Dior had already been influencing the Soviet fashion scene even before its 1959 show in Moscow. The Soviets and France, besides numerous variances on many fronts, shared a similar fashion landscape: “fashion as a means of revitalization” (Bronner, 2021, p. 17). Evident in the articles from the time, there was no denying that Dior was the designer “who guided its [fashion’s] transition from misery to majesty” and created a new ‘silhouette’ that still influences the way women dress to this day, a feat that not many designers could achieve (McAuley, 2023). From fashion history’s standpoint, he helped restore a beleaguered postwar Paris as the fashion capital. Each of his collections throughout this period had a theme. Spring 1947 was “Carolle,” or “figure 8,” a name that suggested the silhouette of the new look with its prominent shoulders, accentuated hips, and small waist (Charleston & Koda, 2004). A look called “Bar” from this collection was christened “New Look” by the then Editor-in-Chief of Harper’s Bazaar, Carmel Snow.



Figure 11 & 12. Backstage photos from the 1947 Dior Fashion Show. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

Just like in Paris, socialist fashion ideals were also evolving to allow more gendered fashion. Feminist theorist Ilya Parkins argued that Dior personally sought to redefine the image of femininity after WWII (Picardie, 2022). Its new style of femininity was drastically distinct from other simpler styles, such as Chanel's. Chanel's look was popular during the war because Paris fashion went through substantial changes due to both material scarcity and the need for practical clothing for the "now working woman."



Figure 13. Style of Chanel: Military-inspired tweed suit with a simple silhouette. *Note.* From *Rédaction*.

After the war was over, Dior wanted to create a new aesthetic that liberated women from the burden of war. In his autobiography, he stated his vision: "In December 1946, as a result of the war and uniforms, women still looked and dressed like Amazons . . . But, I designed clothes for flower-like women" (2018). At the time, his statement stirred up some controversy, since even though women gained the right to vote in 1944, their status had barely changed. His choice to revive the ultra-feminine aesthetic amid this tension misleadingly portrayed him as if he were condoning the idea of returning women to so-called "pretty things," angering members of the feminist movement. When Dior visited Chicago to promote "New Look," a mob of angry female protesters awaited, screaming, "Mr. Dior, we abhor dresses to the floor" (McAuley, 2023, as cited in Bronner, 2021, p. 19). Some Dior models were even physically assaulted on the streets (Picardie, 2022).



Figure 14. Dior models attacked in the streets of Paris. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

However, despite the controversy, Parkins (2012) carefully attests that Dior's designs were inspired by his nostalgia for his childhood during the Belle Epoque, highlighting how he praises his muses as an "extension of [him]self . . . suggest a fluidity of gender identity that is striking given his overt conservatism" (Dior, 2018, p. 95). In other words, Dior's ultra-femininity was not to constrain women but rather to relieve them from the memories of war by restoring the aesthetics from the pre-war times of his childhood.

Dior in Defiance of the Nazi Regime

In this historical perspective, one may mistakenly question why the Soviet officials collaborated with Dior, who worked for the house of Lelong during WWII and made dresses for Nazi officials' wives and collaborators. After WWII, the Soviet Union's treatment of Nazi collaborators was extremely intense—depending on their level of collaboration, they had to face punishments of varying severity, from imprisonment to death. Those who were able to escape were still "isolated from the rest of society" and "usually assigned to fulfill the most 'dirty' jobs connected with the extermination of the population" (Kovalev, 1998, p. 43-48). Yet in fact, compared to his contemporaries, he had the fewest ties with the Nazis, especially considering that it was a nearly impossible feat to find a brand that survived WWII without any Nazi collaboration. For example, Gabrielle Chanel, the founder of Chanel, became "the mistress of the German intelligence officer Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage" during WWII (Warner, 2011). The Vuitton family, the owners of the luxury luggage brand Louis Vuitton, "actively supported the puppet government led by Marshal Philippe Pétain and made money from their business dealings with the Germans" ("Louis Vuitton's," 2004).



Figure 15. A dress that is believed to Christian Dior's work during his time at the house of Lelong. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

Unlike them, Dior was always opposed to the idea of collaboration, even when he could not avoid creating dresses for those wives and collaborators. Back then, Lucien Lelong, for whom he worked, was convincing the Nazi Party not to move French couture to Berlin and had to keep the officials somewhat pleased. In his memoir *My Years and Seasons*, Pierre Balmain (2021), Dior's friend and colleague at Lelong, notes Dior's opinions on the customers they were obliged to dress. This recollection clearly shows Dior's frustration from being forced to dress the clients only to continue his craft during the war:

The clientele at Lelong during the Occupation consisted mainly of wives of French officials who had to keep up appearances, and of industrialists who were carrying on business as usual. Apart from Madame Abet, the French wife of the German Commissioner, few Germans came to us. Nevertheless, there was still a somewhat unreal, strange atmosphere about the showings. I remember I was standing with Christian Dior behind a screen, scanning the audience awaiting the first showing of 1943, the women who were enjoying the fruits of their husbands' profiteering. "Just think!" he exclaimed. "All those women going to be shot in Lelong dresses!"

Also, most importantly, Catherine Dior, his sister, first muse, and one of the founding members of the House of Christian Dior, was a member of the F2 resistance during WWII. More widely known by the code name "Caro," she was given tasks to "gather and transmit information on the movements of German troops and warships, and to do so, she made frequent and lengthy trips by bicycle to liaise with other F2 agents" (Picardie, 2021, p. 54). She also used the apartment she shared with him to hold meetings that provided intelligence to the British forces planning for D-Day.



Figure 16. Catherine in 1947, aged 30. *Note.* From *Miss Dior: A Story of Courage and Couture*, by Justine Picardie, 2022.

Dior supported her work and held her in high regard, which was also why he carried on with his job. His employment allowed him to help Lelong coax the Nazis and to financially support himself, his sister, and, in extension, her work as an F2 agent (Picardi, 2021). His contribution in defiance of the Nazis, in other words, aligned with the Soviets' standpoint and befitted him presenting the show in Moscow.

Public and Media Responses



Figure 17 & 18. Designs by Nadezhda Lamanova. *Note.* From *Fashion East: The Spectre That Haunted Socialism*, by Djurdja Bartlett, 2010.

From the Russian Revolution in 1917 to the thaw of Russia, the progress in the Soviet fashion industry was rather stagnant, despite the government's efforts for improvement. Until the designers at GUM began replicating designs from Western brands such as Dior, Soviet fashion still had a reputation for being tacky, both domestically and internationally. Even the insiders, while playing along with the government's plan, were not satisfied with the designs produced by the government-backed fashion houses. Indeed, some prominent Soviet designers disapproved of Western influence. Nadezhda Lamanova, an early Soviet fashion designer before the time of Dior, had refused to work with French fashion designer Paul Poiret ("King of Fashion") and publicly advocated for "Socialist realism in fashion" (Bartlett, 2010, p. 43-45). Prominent designers, including L. K. Efremova in the 1950s and 1960s, claimed that the French Haute Couture magazines were useless and inappropriate (Zakharova, 2010). Yet, unpublished reports consistently expressed interest in studying French fashion, and early Soviet designs, such as Lamanova's, were disappearing. As a result of Dior's style seeping into the now more culturally open Soviet fashion scene, Soviet designers' shows in Moscow began to have the Dior flair to their work, despite the inevitable drawback: lack of originality as they mostly derive their ideas from Western designers.

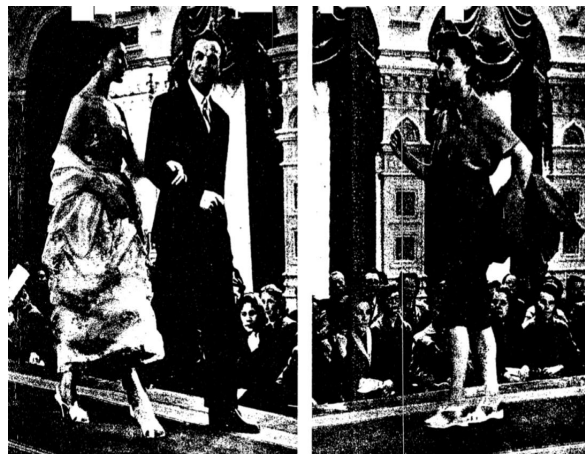


Figure 19. Photo of Western-inspired designs by the Soviet designers. *Note.* From "Moscow Fashions Go Dior and Ivan League," by Nicholas Tikhomiroff, 1957.



Figure 20. Soviet design by Nadezhda Lamanova before Western influence. *Note.* From *Fashion East: The Spectre That Haunted Socialism*, by Djurdja Bartlett, 2010.

Still, many reporters from the U.S. who had exhibited negative views of Soviet fashion, especially of its conservative styles, favored this Western inspiration, or even “invasion,” as some might call it (“Dior in Moscow,” 2010). For example, in a 1957 article “Fashion Designers of the Soviet Bloc Meeting in Moscow: East Germans Critical Hungarian Good Taste” published in *The New York Times*, Max Frankel (1957) comments that “if she lived near the Polish-East German border, her hemline would be where it is in New York; as she moved East, it would drop a bit” (as cited in Bronner, 25). He describes the spectrum of “Communist woman” fashion, with one side closer to Western fashion and the other side remaining in the past.



Figure 21 & 22. *Note.* From “Dior in Moscow: A Taste for Luxury in Soviet Fashion Under Khrushchev,” by Larissa Zakharova, 2010.

In “Moscow Fashions Go Dior and Ivan League,” another *The New York Times* reporter, Nicholas Tikhomiroff (1957), reveals the resemblance between the design promoted at the GUM and Western designs, such as Dior’s (as cited in Bronner, 2021). Here he states that the clothes inspired by Dior are “gayer, more colorful—more western,” and less conservative than typical Soviet women’s clothing. He also notes that the outfits from the “Dior-inspired” shows at GUM “display[ed] a larger amount of skin compared to typical Soviet Fashion” (1957). The presence of the Décolleté dress with a low neckline at the show hinted that the level of conservativeness in the Soviet fashion industry was changing. In other words, how Dior-inspired pieces appeared on the 1957 runway even before Dior’s show in 1959 marked a significant shift in the Soviet fashion landscape, transforming what the Soviet government, fashion designers, and public deemed appropriate and appealing.



Figure 23. Note. From "Moscow Fashions Go Dior and Ivan League," by Nicholas Tikhomiroff, 1957.

Noticeably, GUM, the site of these shows, was a mainstream department store. It was not only the rich elite who attended this luxury fashion event; regardless of the wealth gap, Soviet citizens from all walks of life appeared. In May 1959, articles related to Dior accepting the Soviet invitation for the GUM fashion shows were released, drawing international attention to the commencement of the project. For two to three presentations a day for a week, the show displayed all of the 120 outfits, everything from evening gowns to loungewear (Bartlett, 2010). Numerous high-quality photo records of large crowds gathering around GUM demonstrate the international attention this event received. While parts of this five-day-long show were reserved for the political elite, the rest was available for the public, who showed up to watch models "parading through Moscow . . . ahead of a five-night Christian Dior fashion show" (Cosgrove, 2014).

A private showing tonight of Christian Dior fashions at the French Embassy attracted more than 450 women, with husbands in tow, from Moscow's fifty foreign embassies. A few Russians. Several ballerinas attended the show merce under the patronage of the Soviet cultural exchange authorities. ("Show in Moscow," 1959)



Figure 24 & 25. Photos from the 1959 show. Note. From "Dior Comes to Moscow: Tracing the Threads of Haute Couture in the Soviet Union" by Sophie Hardie, 2020.

Staging a Western fashion show in front of the mainstream audience allowed the Soviet government to notice that its people wore "Western clothing." Though the American press of the time may have described

the 1959 show as a last-minute plea to salvage the fashion industry, it was unmistakable that this plan of opening up to the international fashion market had been in motion since 1957, considering other shows at GUM and the government-funded trip to France mentioned above, which was met with reverence.

In the 1950s the nascent Thaw and its advocating of Soviet coexistence with the West permitted Soviet designers to visit French couture houses for education. Tours of the Dior company, which at the time was headed by a young Yves Saint Laurent, no doubt left Soviet designers giddy with admiration as they requested repeat visits in the name of enrichment. (Hardie, 2020)

While most of the American journalists highlighted the styles of clothes and their comparison with the Soviet designs, some documented the reactions from the Soviet attendees. The Western media coverage of this high-profile event, including *The New York Times* article “Dior models held in awe by Russians,” confirms that overall the event gained positive reactions from the Soviet public (Emerson, 1959).



Figure 26 & 27. More photos from the Dior show. *Note.* From “Dior Comes to Moscow: Tracing the Threads of Haute Couture in the Soviet Union” by Sophie Hardie, 2020.

Conclusion

The 1959 Dior show in Moscow served as an effective strategy during the Khrushchev Thaw, liberalizing Soviet fashion that previously promoted “hygiene” over beauty or luxury as an aesthetic standard to serve the working class. Though Khrushchev opened up the state’s gate with caution in a censored manner, the show still epitomized the inevitable process of Westernization. It appealed not only to the “NEPmen,” who could afford luxury fashion, but also to the public, who all gathered to witness this pivotal shift. Compared to other luxury brands, Dior befitted the role of guiding such transformation, or liberation, as one might say, since its goal was to revitalize fashion as well. Its highly artistic taste successfully encouraged the Soviet designers in need of inspiration to learn from French fashion and expand their styles. Also, Dior’s support for Catherine Dior’s resistance to the Nazi regime aligned with the Soviet Union’s response to Nazi collaborators after WWII. In other words, Dior’s appearance in Moscow was a timely and symbolic event in Soviet fashion history.

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