Baby-Blue “Bullet-Proof” Satin Bras: the Excursion Into the Soviet Consumer Realities

Natasha Tolstikova, University of Gloucestershire, UK

Soviet consumer culture is a debatable phenomenon. The particular consumer manifestations and a functioning but limited advertising vouch for its existence. This paper argues that in addition, the gradual strengthening of the Soviet consumer culture was evident in changing norms and attitudes—a phenomenon that eventually led to the collapse of the socialist system. These changes were reflected in the visual and verbal gestalt of the advertisements. Concentrating on women’s underwear, a controversial item, the paper analyzes four advertising posters employing visual iconographic approach proposed by Panofsky and interpreted by Leeuwen (2001). In addition to being the trade propaganda, Soviet advertising also played the political role, although it became more subtle with the progression of history. The paper demonstrates the changes in advertising values from functional to symbolic and argues that these developments can be explained by internal historical factors as well as by macro-historical changes.

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers debate if consumer culture in the Soviet Union was a valid phenomenon. Traditional Western view on consumption in the Soviet Union is captured in the statement by Karpova et al (2007). The authors argue that in the Soviet planned economy neither marketplace nor consumers existed in the Western understanding of the terms, mainly because the freedom of choice did not exist (106). However, several researchers demonstrated that Soviet consumer culture, albeit different from that of the Western one, was valid and existed throughout, citing a number of manifestations and elements (e.g. Reid (2002); Kelly and Volkov (1998); Cox (2003)). At the start, it was characterized by shortages and later by the black market; consumer culture has manifested itself through such powerful consumer drives and desires that in post-Soviet times it resulted in the explosion of the market economy. To satisfy purists, we shall call this phenomenon “para-consumer culture,” where the state encouraged the population “to consume in particular ways” (Reid 2002, 216) and consumers were skillful in obtaining and interacting with the goods.

To study particulars of Soviet consumer realities has an additional allure because it becomes an arena of the struggle between an ordinary citizen and the state, thus destroying the myth of totality in the totalitarian state. “It was … in the everyday that the grand master narrative of the Soviet Union moved in a Bakhtinian sense from the monologic to the polylogic as Soviet citizens proceeded to reformulate or subvert it—not with the intent of bringing down the system, but simply to buy a decent pair of shoes” (Baker 1999, 22). Some researchers argue that it was shortages of goods and faulty distribution that eroded Socialist economies and led to the collapse of the whole system (i.e. Reid 2002).

For the most part of the Soviet history everyday mundane objects such as underwear and undergarments have been ignored or neglected by the economy. The state also instilled certain policies toward underwear not only through its limited production but also through non-action: by ignoring the issue. Yet, the people’s attitudes toward underwear demonstrate a complex web of ingenuity, creativity, and desires. Understandably, there was no need to advertise for the item produced in limited quantities. However, a few images were uncovered. This paper analyses the history, representation, and meaning of Soviet women’s underwear as a manifestation of consumer attitudes and resistance.

This article claims that the gradual strengthening of the Soviet consumer culture was evident in changing social beliefs and attitudes evident in advertising. These changes were reflected in the visual and verbal gestalt of the advertisements. The paper analyzes four advertising posters corresponding to the leadership periods of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev. Using historical analysis and textual reading, it provides a contextual background to the images, (Schroeder 2006, 9). My method rests upon the iconographic approach envisioned by Panofsky and interpreted by Leeuwen (2001).

Unlike most semiotic analyses that are concerned with signs and their relationships, iconography additionally is preoccupied with the context and “how and why cultural meanings of their visual expressions come about historically” (92). There are three levels of pictorial meaning: representational (similar to “decoding” or description of the images), iconographical symbolism (or relation between objects and signs that concentrates on the concepts attached to images), and iconological symbolism (that identifies ideological meaning of the image) (ibid, 100-101). My analysis will be employed along these three dimensions.

BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTERN WOMEN’S UNDERWEAR

There are two prevalent positions explaining the reason for undergarments to come about: symbolic and practical. Saint-Laurent argued that “the birth of [under]clothing must be placed between that of religion and art, it cannot be compared with weapons, hunting implements or agricultural tools” (1974, 7). As such, social classes signified their status through different wears; different sexes who sported same type of outer clothing (such as togas in Ancient Greece) wore underclothes that were strictly feminine and masculine (36). The other theory holds that early underwear appeared for the reason of protecting the bodies from scratchy and stiff fabric of outerwear and also of protecting expensive costumes “from the dirt of the bodies they adorned” (Wilson 2003, 102). The early underwear did not even resemble contemporary lingerie; in ancient times women wore slips that progressed to Victorian bifurcated undergarments (not, however, connected at the crotch) (Entwistle 2000). Women’s panties in a contemporary form appeared only in the 20th century (Wilson 2003, 102). Whatever the start was, fairly quickly it gained one more function: women’s underwear became a tool of seduction, turning into the kind of clothing that is “more naked than nudity” (Carter 1982, 97). Already in the late Victorian era the appearance and meaning of women’s underwear changed, making it “more elaborate and sexually codified” (Entwistle 2000, 203). Its mere proximity to the skin and its intricate construction with lace, frills, and see-through fabrics made it erotically charged. Particularly, stockings has been a common sex fetish (ibid, 204).

Historically, underwear has been a personal item, visible only to the wearer and to intimate partners. The wide universe of lingerie: panties and brasseries, stockings and garter belts, corsets and girdles long have been mechanisms of transforming the woman’s body into a fashionable shape. With its enhancements, such as pads and whale bones, undergarments have been deceptive by nature; “their function is to make artificial shape seem real” (Saint-Laurent 1974, 68). Jantsen et al. argued that undergarments have been instruments of containment and control of women’s bodies that made them fit the “aesthetic ideals and political concerns of a male-dominated society” (2007: 178). At the same time, their article demonstrates that lingerie empowers women even when she is not in public (ibid).

Curiously, lingerie becomes a meeting point for the public and the private, where outerwear signifies the public and underwear stands for the private. Historically, the first undergarments were originally outer garments (Saint-Laurent 1974, 12). While the underwear grew in numbers and complexity, it was intermittently worn either under the clothes or over the clothes (i.e., according to Renaissance fashion, the bustier was worn over the dress). The distinction is fluid. In the Western culture of the 20th century the deliberate visibility of underwear parallels “ambiguity surrounding privacy, intimacy and sexuality” (Wilson 2003, 107).

Generally, advertising is designed to stir emotions and desires in its target. At first, advertising for underwear was rather modest, praising functionality of the product. At the end of the 19th century, American advertising for corsets emphasized their ability to en-
hance one’s figure as well as the comfort and ease of wear (Reichert 2003, 56-60). But soon the practicality was replaced by sensuality and seductive abilities of underwear. By the 1900s, advertisements for stockings commonly displayed women lifting their hems to show off the product (ibid, 83). With the increase in variety of underwear brands, their promotion became more explicit and suggestive, relying on sexual images that activate biological instincts. In his study of sexual images in advertising, Reichert suggested that women in undergarments have been often used as an allure for selling everything—including products that have nothing to do with neither women, nor underwear (ibid).

SOVIET UNDERWEAR

The Bolsheviks had an aspiration to build a new society where the personal would be eliminated and equal citizens would enjoy collective property. Reportedly in the early Soviet communes people shared not only pots and pans but personal clothing, including underwear (see Tolstikova 2001). The ideology of eradicating distinctions between sexes was reflected in the style of the New Soviet body and the style of clothing. The cult of muscular bodies and asceticism was manifested in mass sports parades and unisex clothing, particularly underwear. There were two main unisex items of Soviet underwear, knitted cotton undershirts and boxers which meant to signify comfort, ease of movement, simplicity, and hygiene. Practical Soviet women underwear was designed to better serve the new roles of women’s physical activities in the factory and the kitchen (Abrahams, 2006). In the process of creating a New Soviet person, Soviet sexes were merging; a woman meant to be attractive not because of her sexual attributes (highlighted by sexualized underwear), but through her class dignity (Bulgakova 2002).

A woman could easily become an ideological suspect for wearing a dress adorned with frills or silk stockings (Starshinina 2007). In the 1930s, when the country began to militarize, the garment industries worked overtime, producing military uniforms in massive quantities with men’s underwear as a part of it. Although, women’s underwear was produced as well, the outputs were very limited and it was difficult to buy. As in pre-Industrialization period, women continued to sew their undergarments themselves or to seek services of private seamstresses (ibid). In the planned economy, standards for women underwear were limited. In the 1940, it assumed a single prototype of a brasserie with three sizes (Sevriukova 2006). In the West, since 1920s artificial silk became the fabric of choice for producing intricate underwear and stockings, making them affordable for the masses (Ewing 1974, 88). Similar Soviet items were made of natural fibers such as cotton and wool making them practical but unappealing and even uncomfortable.

In the 1950s, Stalin wanted to project an image of imminent abundance in the desolated war-torn country. Artificial fibers began to be used by consumer industries introducing a Soviet equivalent of nylon—kapron (Filippov 2007). For the first time, Soviet women could experience an affordable luxury, see-through, sleek, leg-shaping kapron stockings. Nevertheless, women exposed to foreign lingerie in the Second World War became weary of the unseemliness of their underwear. In public perception, undergarments were almost obscene; semantics reflected this attitude—people referred to the specific types by their folk nicknames, such as “the anthracite” for the men’s cotton black boxers or “the bullet-proof” for reinforced blue satin brass (Anon 2004-2005). According to the Soviet oral mythology, in the late 1950s, a French movie actor, either Yves Montand or Gérard Philippe or Alain Delon (the mythical details vary depending on the speaker) was so shocked by Soviet underwear that he bought it in large quantities and created a sensation by displaying his private collection in Paris (Sevriukova 2006).

Soviet attitude towards underclothing was ambiguous. Women were ashamed of its plainness, and while wearing it they exercised rules of modesty. Nevertheless, bras and panties, sometimes, very unsightly, worn and mended, without a shame were hung outdoors or in communal hallways to dry up after the wash. There was a paradox of chastity bordering on sanctimony when people ignored or even pretended not to notice each other underpants openly displayed in the communal spaces. Because specialized clothing such as swimming or sports suits was difficult to come by, both women and men often wore underwear as outerwear when working on their garden plots, swam or sunbathed (Starshinina 2007), creating ambiguity between private and public.

Living in the system where apparel industries produced uniform-style clothing, and perhaps, because they were forced to have public existence, Soviet women wanted to make their underwear different and distinct. There were few choices available to express their individuality through the underwear. Those, lucky to have a slender built preferred to shop in children’s departments: made from multi colored fabrics, the panties for girls was more appealing that adult underwear. In home economics classes, schoolgirls learned how to sew panties; they often made them from colorful calico and adorned with ribbons and lace (Denisova 2002). When a Soviet person was going abroad, usually on business, his female relatives supplied him with a list of everybody’s measurements of waists, chests, and the lower bodies so women were able to establish their uniqueness and if not to express their identity, at least to differentiate themselves from others (Culloudon 2004).

The Soviet state tried to control all aspects of human existence, including the underwear. The system supplied the utilitarian bare necessities, depriving women of the symbolic and the sensual. However, after Stalin’s death Krushchev came to power and lifted the symbolic Iron Curtain, exposing the country to foreign fashions, images, and culture. As a by-product, during the 1960s period nicknamed A Thaw, the culture of romanticism with its symbolism and anti-materialism took hold (see Tolstikova 2001). However Brezhnev’s times brought individualism, erasing the altruistic revolutionary spirit. The long neglect of consumer desires made some authors to suggest that underwear was never advertised (Culloudon 2004). Using recently published collections of Soviet advertising posters, I was able to uncover a few examples. Soviet underwear advertising reflected the trend shift from the functional to the symbolic. Advertising examples from different eras will provide the visual proof of this transformation.

ANALYSIS

The first example is an agitation poster from 1934 by A. Kokorekin (Snopkov et al. 2004, 158) (Figure 1). The country was in the midst of industrialization with large population migrating to urban centers (Filtzer, 1999). Women had important roles as able-bodied workers and procurators of future generations. The poster propagates physical culture among women. On a representational level, there is a woman in her black underwear in a household setting doing an exercise routine. There is a window behind her and a Vienna back chair with a kitchen towel hanging from it. What looks like a domestic striped rug lies underneath her white sports slippers. The vertical panel on the right shows different exercises for the routine with the words underneath “Daily physical exercise routine—necessary for passing the physical state norms.” The slogan underneath the image states “Be ready for labor and defense!”

Iconographic symbolism that reflects relations between objects signifies the importance of the woman; her stocky and muscular figure with spread arms occupies the center of the poster.
Traditional fascination with pale refined beauties gave way to respect for the red cheek healthy ideals. The strength of the woman’s body symbolizes the changed roles of women in a proletarian state and the importance of being physically fit and ready to land her hand to the cause of building the new world order. She, nevertheless, exhibits traditional female traits: she retained long hair gathered in the back of her head, her home is tidy and clean, the kitchen towel is pristine white. The picture is also connected with the future: a traditional peasant physique of a woman is exposed to urban industrial landscapes in her background.

Because it is an example of political agitation, iconological symbolism or ideological meaning of the image, reflects in straightforward verbal propaganda of the text. With particular interest to our central concern, the underwear, there is an affirmation of the naturalness of the women’s body minus its carnal attributes. The woman is primary a worker and a mother, an equal social participant approaching a man in physicality. She wears black underwear that in Western societies is synonymous with naughtiness (Carter 1974, 96) but was used as sports wear in Soviet Russia on the 1930s. The woman is comfortable in her body and wants to improve it for physical labor. The underwear here is a functional utilitarian item.

The second image is the advertising poster from 1952 by V. Pimenov (Snopkov et al. 2007, 224) (Figure 2). Stalin was still in power, the country was recovering from devastations of the war. Propagating “the myth of abundance,” Stalin forged an ideological consensus with the party elite by improving their everyday life with consumer goods (Fitzler 1999). Developments in chemistry secured new consumer products; one example was women’s stockings. At the first, representational level of the image, we see an upper body of a woman in a frontal position wearing a short-sleeved dress and showing a sheer stocking to the viewer. She occupies the center of the poster, done in a lavender-pink palette. She looks directly at the viewer; her lips are slightly parted into a tentative smile. The headline states, “Kapron stockings. Beautiful, durable, hygienic.” The word “kapron” is in large red cursive serif whereas
the rest is in white blocky sans serif on a pink background. The text on top identifies the distributor, “The Ministry of the Light Industry of U.S.S.R. Moscow Distributor of Sewing Goods.” Typical of Soviet merchandize world, there is no brand name or trade mark; we cannot even be sure that the stockings were Soviet made.

Iconographic symbolism of colors tied stockings to delight and calmness; curved lines and the delicacy with which the woman’s hands hold the stocking probably elicited association with femininity and exquisiteness of the product. The oversized lettering of the product name and a half-smile of the model hinted at the reserved excitement about the product. Her style of dress suggests casual environment thus she is probably not a sales clerk but a perspective user. However, rather than showing the product in use, the poster demonstrates a mere existence of the product somewhere in the Soviet universe. The artistic style and colors inform ideological symbolism. Through the realistic style the woman depicted in this advertisement communicates qualities of an exemplary Soviet woman; she is modest, her dress is not revealing or seductive yet she is fit; she does not wear any cosmetics or jewelry yet her eyebrows suggest that they have been tweezed; her casual interaction with the stocking demonstrates her sedated joy. Her eyes look directly communicating equality with the viewer thus expressing the principals of collectivity. Even in Soviet fashion one is expected to be modest and simple: the ideology of collectivism prohibited anybody to stand out from the masses (Vainshtein 1996, 71). This woman is rather a display prop for the Soviet stockings. The heart palpitations cannot even be sure that the stockings were Soviet made. 

FIGURE 3

The third image is an advertising poster from 1966 by S. Lapaev (Snopkov et al. 2007, 238) (Figure 3). Technically, Khrushchev was already ousted but the initiatives that he had started had long lasting effects. Khrushchev wanted to restore the Communist ideals through changing ideological discourse and by spreading state authority into consumption, taste and fashion, areas of life considered private in other societies (Reid 2002: 216). Youth’s cultural values of romanticism and enthusiasm manifested in developing new virgin territories but also were signified by the “softer” artistic styles (see Tolstikova 2001). On a representational level the advertising image is a drawing of female legs below the knee from the back angle. The rest of the woman is invisible to the viewer. She wears white heels and a sheer skirt/dress/slip. The white background has an abstract spot in grey with a thistle “catching” a stocking which the woman tries to untangle with her hand. The headline reads, “Seamless kapron stockings fashionable and inexpensive.” The advertiser, “The Russian Clothing Distributor of the Ministry of the Trade or R.S.F.S.R.” is identified with a barely readable text in a vertical side line in the lower right corner. There are five different typefaces used in this advertisement: two of them are serif and three are sans serifs.

Body cropping/symbolic dismemberment has been a persistent topic in the analysis of Western advertising images (e.g, Kilbourne 1999). The theory holds that when a woman is represented by just a body part, this symbolically signifies that her body is separated from her mind and she ceased to be a whole person and therefore she looses her individuality (Cortese 2005, 38). The iconographic symbolism of this image rests on the assumption that S. Lapaev had chosen to concentrate on female legs for the purpose of calling attention to the product in use—it calls to the viewer to witness how beautiful it makes women’s legs, but also how delicate the product is (but inexpensive too, even if it is damaged by a thistle there will be no trouble to replace it!). Traditionally in art, “the special sexual emphasis was given to women’s legs” (Berger 1972, 138). However, in this case rather than evoking sexual feelings, the visual details celebrate sensuality and romanticism—the angle, the sheerness of the hem, and even the thistle.

The iconological symbolism of this image is a mix of contradictory signs. On the one hand it speaks of modernity (typography, abstractedness of the thistle), elegance and femininity (elongated limbs, dainty gesture of releasing the stocking), sensuality (forces a viewer to concentrate on female legs), and dynamism (the movement rather than stationary position of the 1952 woman). In short the image signifies a new reality by challenging the suffocating...
artistic Socialist Realist canons. On the other hand, rather than being abstractedly indifferent as in the 1952 advertisement, the depiction is more realistic through a narrative (a thistle).

The final image is a 1965 advertising poster by E. Filimonov (Snopkov et al. 2007, 239) (Figure 4). Brezhnev was already in power and the image reflects the values propagated. Already by the 1960s the state had realized the impossibility of the speedy achievement of Communism; both ideologically and economically the country was in stagnation. The acquisitiveness of material goods intensified. For the first time in the history of the Soviet ideology, material possessions lost its negative connotations. Collectivist socialist ideas had gradually been replaced by individualism (Millar 1985: 703). The poster depicts a female silhouette wearing a fitted pink see-through flowing camisole on a black background. The heading underneath the image states, “Rayon lingerie, elegant and practical.” The producer is identified as The Ministry of the Trade of the Russian Federation. The “female” curves to the back in a coquettish pose, her eyes are turned downward; her arms are stretched to the front and rolled toward her body. She has a full figure with small waist. There are no legs depicted below the hem. The “female” has long hair that falls below the shoulders. Her underwear is visible through the transparent rayon of the camisole.

On the iconographic level, there is a stark contrast between the pink of camisole and the black of background which makes the product to stand out. The pose of the figure is artificial, allowing for demonstration of the details of the camisole, such as its transparency, lace details of the bodice and hem. The “female” is depicted alone in her intimate moment. Unlike women in the 1952 advertisement, she is not only the user of the product but she is emotionally involved with the product, apparently enjoying herself. E. Filimonov chose to represent this user in a “dream-like” image, allowing the imagination of the viewer to do additional work. This depiction of a curvaceous female figure in her undergarments is an open advertising text suggesting sensuality, sex appeal, and fantasy on the part of the viewer, thus opening the dialogic space.

The iconological symbolism of the image suggests the “softening” of the official ideology toward women by recognizing their feminine appeal and even the right to being sex objects. The contrasting colors attest to the courage to deal with the issue. Factors such as the soft curves of the “female,” manner of representation, chosen point of view (suggesting to the viewer this intimate image as if by accident)—all speak of increasing importance of femininity and recognition of privacy in the society. The clear enjoyment of the product by the subject of the advertisement signifies the growing significance of consumer goods and more favorable attitude toward personal possessions.

IDEOLOGICAL ROLE OF ADVERTISING IN THE SOVIET SYSTEM

In the immediate post-revolutionary years, advertising techniques were used to create ideological agitation and propaganda. For only a few years in the 1920s, the private trade enjoyed a temporary comeback with explosion of street advertisements. After much debates about the role of the advertising under Soviet conditions, whether this capitalist tool should be adopted for different realities (e.g. Tolstikova 2007), the purposes of the socialist advertising were officially defined in 1957 by a Conference of Advertising Workers of Socialist Countries; they were to inform the rational norms of consumption, to assist trade, and, lastly, to educate consumers’ taste (Crowley and Reid 2000, 10-11). Everything that was published in the Soviet Union, be it an article, a book or an advertisement, was authorized by the state—the state was the advertiser and the advertising agency. There were no disagreements between the client and the executor, since they were the same.

Rather than create excitement and desire for the product, the post-war Soviet advertising transmitted the rationality of a material world of Soviet goods. It was important for Soviet advertising to communicate the idea that there were enough material goods for every Soviet consumer. Under these conditions, material goods symbolized the stability of a peaceful Soviet existence. It was often enough to show that the product was simply available (Sal’nikova 2001, 174-175).

Not surprisingly, food was the top priority for the long deprived population. In 1948 Food Advertising Organization, started
to dress “the shop window of socialism” perpetuating the “myth of abundance” (Shkliaruk, 2007, 6). Print advertisements depicted oversized tins of crabs and champagne floating in the air and sometimes smiling citizens next to the products. The depiction of an idealized product was intended to create delight and admiration in the customer used to asceticism of the war period.

Khrushchev’s increased output of consumer industries which often resulted in surpluses urged the improvement of product distribution. He considered advertising to be an important tool of the newly developing Soviet marketing that helped to move the goods (c.f. Goldman, 1963). Advertising of the 1960s operated under a slogan “Soviet means excellent!” and carried a symbolic meaning of priorities of socialism over capitalism.

The Soviet character prohibited a person from demonstrating extreme desires for material goods therefore Soviet advertising exhibited restraint. The purpose of socialist advertising was not to generate consumer desires but to promote “rational consumption” (Reid, 2002, 218). In Stalin’s time, advertising did not surprise or entertain but attracted the consumer’s attention to mostly food items, such as vitamins, fish oil, or toothpaste that would be nutritious for restoring or maintaining health. Advertising photographs were rare; illustrations drawn in the style of Socialist Realism were more likely to promote the idea of abundance. Khrushchev’s regime had a goal of modernizing the country not only through industrialization but through daily life. The realistic representational style of the earlier advertising became inappropriate for the Khrushchev’s Communism project. It required artistic laconism and allowed empty spaces (Shkliaruk, 2007, 7).

The advertisements analyzed are advertising posters. Posters were large, colorful and were displayed near the point of purchase, inside the shops. Unlike in the West where in-store advertising would serve as a reminder and an encouragement for a purchase, Soviet advertisements often served as a visual replacement for the physical merchandise (Shkliaruk, 2007, 6). Advertising posters were consumed in the public space of a store; depending on its specific location customers either glanced at it briefly or looked it at intently if they happened to have it in their view when they stood in line. During Stalin’s era they demonstrated the promised abundance, during Khrushchev’s they were the window into Communism where citizens were to have everything and during Brezhnev’s they were empty signs or meaningless decorations.

**DISCUSSION**

Comparison of the four advertisements demonstrates the changes that, on one level, can be explained with the internal historical trends, namely with changing Soviet values and attitudes. Ideological perception of women’s social roles evolved from an equal partner to the proletarian man to the traditional view where a woman was perceived as a vessel for a new life to modern patriarchal where external values such as good looks and fashion started to be important. The analysis also reveals the changes in Soviet advertising from ideological propaganda to a neutral store window to a communication vehicle for symbolism. But, on another level, the changes can also be attributed to macro historical developments. Martens and Casey (2007) argue that after the World War II, the winning countries encountered affluence which was more pronounced in the West where consumption shifted away from the practical/functional to luxury/symbolic (220). Apparently, similar processes manifested itself in the Soviet Union. The attitudes toward individual consumption were changing; contemporary Soviet advertising reflected the changes and confirmed the trend.

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