From "Backwardness" to "Modern Culture"?
"Beauty" and "Femininity" during the Soviet Cultural Modernization (1930-1960s)

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For my dissertation, which deals with practices of maternity and beauty in Soviet Russia in three decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s, I decided to adopt an oral history approach and make interviews with women who were young adults at the time. The focus of my research was an analysis of the importance of the practices of beauty and maternity for the production of Soviet femininities. In addition, I investigated how women interpreted the discourses on female beauty and maternity, as they adjusted their lives and bodies to those discourses, on one hand, and how they subverted them, on the other hand.

My initial intention was to include not only women from the centre (most of the research on Soviet every-day life concerns women from Moscow and St.Petersburg12), but to interview women from regions other than those of ethnic Russians. Thus, besides Moscow, I have chosen Saratov (in Volga region) and Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan (Volga-Urals region). The widening of the geographical and ethnic scope to include women from ethnic minorities (including particularly Bashkirs, but also Tatars) in research into the Soviet past introduced new problems and, consequently, contributed to bringing new aspects to light. This article elaborates on some of those findings, particularly those connected to beauty practices.

In the first section of the article I analyze problems related to the inclusion of minority women in research concerning the Soviet gender history. This section deals with contemporary approaches to studies of the non-Russian regions in the Russian Federation. The second part of this article is dedicated to an analysis of that part of the Soviet discourses on beauty that is aimed at women from the former Russian colonies. The third part, finally, presents an analysis of memories of everyday practices of beauty in the 1930s to the 1960s.

“Other” women and Soviet/Post-Soviet studies

The problems with analyzing non-Russian women in Russia, particularly in an article written in English, originate in the very word for the citizen of contemporary Russia. In contrast to the Russian language, where there is one word that defines a “Russian” as a representative of an ethnic group (russk(ai)a/ii), and another word to define a citizen of the Russian state (rossiyan(ka)/in), the English expression is the same for both. This has consequences for a study devoted to those differences.

If we leave the ambiguity of the English language, however, and concentrate on the problem of the internal “Other” as such, the number of uncertainties increase. In the present day, scholars adopt various approaches as they attempt to come to terms with this problem.

The first approach prioritizes citizenship over other kinds of social belonging – ethnic, religious or regional. In contemporary Russia a great number of studies (including those comparing the situation in Russia with the situation in other countries) which concern regions that have extensive ethnic or religious minorities, and that used to be colonies of the Russian Empire, analyze these regions alongside and on the same conditions as predominantly Russian regions.13 When a result of such a study concerns a special condition of a particular region it is treated as a “regional” specific. Thus, any mention of “colonial power relationships”, the “imperial past” or a specific “ethnic tradition” becomes meaningless. This can be illustrated through a recent publication by a sociologist from Bashkortostan, Venera Zakirova. In her article “War against the Family - a view from the Bashkortostan republic,” she writes about violence “in a Russian society,” with examples from the Republic of Bashkortostan as one of the federal regions.14

In such a perspective, all women who lived in the territory of the contemporary Russian Federation have a common Soviet past and thus may become objects of studies about gender and every-day life. However, as I pointed out above, this is not the case, since most of the research involving Soviet every-day life and Soviet women considers only Russian women from the central cities (an important exception is a book by David Ransel “Village mothers”15, which attempts to bring village and Tatar women into the analysis). Thus, Soviet and post-Soviet experiences of women “other than Russian” have been largely ignored in studies with this approach.16

The second approach is connected to a post-Soviet “national” and “ethnic rebirth” that led to a re-writing of history from an ethnic and national perspective. These publications pay attention to a collective discrimination in the imperial and the Soviet era, as well as to the role ethnic

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14 The author writes mainly about violence “in Russian society”, provides short information about Bashkortostan, on pages 76-77, without mentioning any ethnic group or minority - Venera Zakirova, “War against the family."
16 The cases when authors bring into their texts their reflexivity about exclusion are few. In a methodological chapter of their book Posadskaya and Engel wrote that they refused to include memories of a Tatar woman into their anthology due to their feelings that her “experiences reflected particularities of her culture that we would have had trouble contextualizing” – Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, A revolution of their own: voices of women in Soviet history. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998, p. 224.
culture and religion played for the forms of oppression and resistance. Consequently, many publications edited, for instance, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, have been criticized by Moscow historians for being too “biased” and “partial”. In some of its radical variants these new national historiographies appear to be very ethnocentric, in search for their roots, offering explanations of history. The case of Bashkortostan is particularly remarkable. This republic is an example of a federal subject where the titular ethnic group – Bashkirs – do not make up a majority of the population. Indeed, Bashkortostan should rather be presented as a federal subject with three minorities: Russians, Tatars and Bashkirs. Given this situation, the “post-colonial” pathos of some publications about Bashkirs or Tatars in this region can be easily interpreted as a struggle for dominance on the local level.

On the other hand, in order to evaluate the situation where a “new”, postcolonial (?) history is created, it is necessary to take into account the character and quality of political changes in Bashkortostan. After the beginning of the transition period, Bashkortostan has been known as one of the less democratic subjects of the Russian Federation. During a long period of time the local regime was rather independent from Moscow, described by the German political scientist Jörn Grävingholt, as a case of post-soviet authoritarianism. The position of the republic’s authorities with respect to the history of relations with the center is ambiguous: this year Bashkortostan is officially celebrating the 400th anniversary of its “voluntary” union with Russia, an event sponsored by the republic’s authorities and widely represented on the web.

The “national rebirth” approach contributes to research on “women” from a particular ethnic group, who are brought into analysis, in Nira Yuval-Davies’ words, primarily as “carriers of a tradition”. Thus Bashkir women are presented as having problems in preserving an “ethnically traditional” life style in the process of urbanization. Due to specificity of the situation

22 http://www.bashkortostan450.ru/?lg=rus&section=160&id=432
of Bashkortostan, these studies, although extensive, leave many questions about the comprehension of the Soviet experience unanswered.

Finally, the third approach is focused on religious identity. In the beginning of the 20th century, religious identity of Tatars and Bashkirs was frequently described as “Muslim”. Since ? and confession were more significant than class differences in the Russian empire, the epithet “Muslim” was regarded as a civil rather than a religious identity at the time. New publications, edited in Russia as well as abroad, attempt to bring together and/or compare the social practices and the historical experiences of people who could be considered “Muslims” from different geographical locations in Russia and former Soviet Union. Particularly important for gender research in this regard is a publication by Elena Omelchenko and Gusel Sabirova, which comes to the conclusion that there are significant differences between post-Soviet gender identities of Dagestani and Tatar women, in spite of their apparently “common” “Muslim” culture and traditions.

In light of my interest in the every-day life of “Soviet women”, these uncertainties are particularly important with regard to research ethics (I myself being an ethnic Russian from Moscow, studying colonial aspects of Soviet politics), as well as for theorizing geographical, ethnic and language boundaries of “Sovietness”. I had a particular problem in carrying out this project since I come from Moscow, and since the Russian language, as the language of Soviet power, is my native language, which is not the case for most of my Bashkir informants. Thus, I was perfectly aware of the fact that dominance, and the questioning of dominance was at play during the interviewing process, and that it could influence the results of my study. Another important problem was connected to my intention to avoid a conversation scenario similar to traditional/Soviet ethnographic interviewing where the bearer of some exotic culture is interviewed for the dominant culture to understand the “exotics” of another. However, my interviewees and other people with whom I spoke in Ufa were ready to have conversations about such issues and proudly told me, “a stranger,” how nice national/ethnic traditions of everyday life are. Indeed, when I expressed my interest not only in Bashkir/Tatar traditions, but also in my informants’ personal experiences of their every-day life in a particular period of Soviet history, they were ready to have a different kind of conversation with me; they accepted me as a “historian” interested mainly in “common” Soviet experiences of “their gen-

25 In contrast to gender research on the experiences of Tajik or Azeri women, the Soviet history of Bashkir and Tatar women of Bashkortostan is usually not studied according to schemes for Central Asia or Azerbaijan, where a specific gender contract is defined (Temkina) or the division of public/private is seen as parallel to the division between Soviet/ethnic(national) (Tohidi) – Anna Temkina, "Гендерный порядок: постсоветские трансформации (Северный Таджикистан)", Гендер. Традиции и современность. Сборник статей. ред. С.Р.Касымова. Душанбе, 2005, 6-92, http://www.genderstudies.info/sbornik/sbornik18.pdf, last accessed 2006.08.7; Nayereh Tohidi, “Soviet in public, Azeri in private. Gender, Islam, and Nationality in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan”, in Women’s Studies International Forum. Vol. 19, 1996, pp.111-123.


27 Мусульмане изменяющейся России. А.М.Кобышев ред. Москва: РОССИЭН, 2002; Hilary Pilkington and Galina Yemelianova eds. Islam in Post-Soviet Russia, public and private faces.

Fighting backwardness, dealing with differences

The history of clothing of the 20th century can according to Diana Crane be presented as a process of the slow disappearance of strict class, regional and gender differences in dress. Soviet Russia was obviously part of this process. However, the homogenization of dress and the softening of regional, ethnic and social boundaries were enormously accelerated by the revolutionary politics of social equality, as well as by strong and direct pressure from the centre towards the regions. What characterises the Soviet process of the “modernization” of appearances, particularly? How far did the politics of equality go with respect to looks and appearances?

The main context for the modernization of appearances is constituted through the discourse on kulturnost that is widely described in works by Sheila Fitzpatrick, Catriona Kelly and Natalia Kozlova. Kulturnost presupposed that every-day life had to be changed according to rational and scientific principles. According to Kelly and Kozlova, the politics of kulturnost, could

31 As Fitzpatrick writes, the idea of kulturnost (Soviet propaganda of raising the level of the culture of the population) was very widespread. “In practice, we can distinguish several levels of the culture that people throughout the Soviet Union were busy mastering. The first was the culture of basic hygiene – washing with soap, toothcleaning, not spitting on the floor – and elementary literacy, which was still lacking among a substantial part of the Soviet population… The second, emphasizing such things as table manners, behavior in public places, the treatment of women and basic knowledge of Communist ideology, was the level of culture required of any town dweller. The third, part of what had once been called “bourgeois” or “petty-bourgeois” culture, was the culture of propriety, involving good manners, correct speech, neat and appropriate dress, and some appreciation of the high culture of literature, music and ballet. This was the level of culture implicitly expected of the managerial
be viewed as the Soviet variant of a civilizing process, or as the realization of Enlightenment ideals.32 The appearance aspects of the kulturnost discourse included, first of all, ideas on hygiene, functionalism and physical training. However, a certain homogenization of looks has a bearing on another aspect of the kulturnost discourse – the struggle against backward customs, habits and looks – this comes across in colonial aspects of the Soviet politics33 of appearance and will be examined here.

In the pamphlet *The art of clothing* (1927), the Soviet minister of health, Nikolai Semashko, wrote: “The understanding of beauty is far from being the same with respect to different nations and different groups of society.”34 However, this did not mean that very different standards of beauty would be tolerated inside the rationally organized Soviet state. To cultivate a “cultural appearance” was seen as an important aim of the kulturnost politics. Whereas peasants may be seen as the first colonized group, countryside clothes were viewed as backward in every sense, in comparison with the possibilities for consumption that cities offered.35 Furthermore an important part of the message of the “kulturnost” discourse was addressed to the non-Russian population of the former Russian empire. Echoing the colonial discourse on the “civilizing mission” of the Russian state, Soviet kulturnost discourse paid special attention to bringing culture to “backward people” (including people of Central Asia, Caucasus, the North and Far East, as well as the Muslim population of the Central Russia – Bashkirs and Tatars).

The work among women of these peoples was coordinated by an institution created especially for this purpose (1926), with the term “backwardness” in its title – The Commission for the improvement of the work and everyday life of the women of culturally backward people.37 The aim of this institution was to defend women’s equal rights in families, to increase literacy, and to work for women’s political enlightenment. In addition, one of the important aims of the commission was to change the backward customs of women’s clothing, including the attempt to make women stop using veils, head scarfs, and elaborate ethnic dresses that were considered unhygienic.38 The modernization of appearances was part of women’s liberation, a campaign which included women’s participation in social life, education, and political activism, and, in addition a forceful anti-religious campaign.

It is important to note that the campaign for the dissemination of Soviet culture ignored all “traditional” and self-organized movements, which may be considered signs of a “high level of cultural development” – for example, a campaign for post-natal hygiene among Bashkir and Tatar families,39 a growing Djadidist network for girls’ education, and edited in a Tatar class, members of the new Soviet elite” – Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times*, pp. 79-80.

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35 About the importance of a “cultural” look for the upward social mobility of former peasants see, for example, Наталья Козлова, *Советские люди...*, p. 217.


37 Комиссия по улучшению труда и быта женщин культурно-отсталых народностей - GARF, P-6983.

38 Труженица Северного Кавказа. 1925. 1-3; ГАРФ, P-6983, оп. 1, ед. хр. 64, п. 29.

39 According to David Ransel, the number of infant mortalities among the Slavic population of the Russian Empire was higher than that of the Muslim and the Jewish population - Давид Рэнсель, “Культура деторождения
language magazine dedicated to women’s education and women’s rights, *Syuyumbike* (1913-1918). On the contrary, Soviet publications about Tatar and Bashkir women from the 1920s –to the 1930s schematically presented them as “backward people” in “national dress” with covered hair, women who had no rights in their families and no education at all. Thus these presentations provided one more argument for “bringing culture” to non-Russians and Russian women. Indeed, the creation of this collective “backward other” contributed to the destruction of those local organizations and political groups that were influential on the eve of the revolution. In addition, it helped to portray the “Russian” centre as a symbol of progress.

The borders of normativity were particularly strong for young, people aspiring to rise in society. For example, a Tatar language magazine entitled *Azat Hatyn* (Liberated woman), published fashion pages in the 1930s with urban dresses that were very similar to those that were published in *Rabotnitsa*. *Azat Hatyn* presented tight dresses and hats, and no models including any elements of Tatar dress. It seems reasonable to conclude that the Tatar look was contrasted to Soviet beauty norms and, consequently, to Soviet ideas of progress. From the 1930s to the 1950s, ethnic differences in look were not permitted for the “active builders of the socialist future” but were reserved for groups considered less ideologically important: elderly people and rural women who were made to represent “real people” in the magazines, in contrast to the “models”.

After the Second World war, the colourful ethnic dress of rural women represented “real people” or different ethnic groups in important state events, probably symbolizing the “Soviet family of nations” or the “unanimous people’s support of the party’s politics”. For example, the newspaper *Red Bashkiria*, dedicated to the elections of 1947, showed an old woman and a young kolkhoz worker in head scarfs, undoubtedly trying to demonstrate the wide participation in the electoral campaign of the autochthonous Bashkir population.

The 1950s saw a revival of the “ethnic look” that was influenced both by trends in international fashion and by a certain liberalization of the country after the beginning of post-stalinist reforms. Thus beginning in 1968, fashion publications from *Azat Khatyn* and the Bashkir language women’s magazine, *Bashkortostan Kizi*, show a hybridity and/or a mixture of styles. In the fashion pages of *Azat Khatyn* from 1958 it is not unusual to find models with a “Tatarness”, wearing dresses with frills and headscarf, along with models wearing “urban dresses”. However, this decorative “Tatarness” look are portrayed as a masquerade rather than an every-day dress. The fashion page from one of the first issues of *Bashkortostan Kyz*, featuring mini skirts that were in style at the time, is even more conspicuous: “Bashkir” ele-

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41 И.А.Стина, Башкирка. Москва: Отдел охраны материнства и младенчества, 1928.
42 Some personal photographs shown during the interview process demonstrated that older, less educated Russian, Bashkir and Tatar women wearing kerchiefs, looks rather similarly than represent difference between “cultural” and “backward look”.
43 *Azat Hatyn*, 1936, N 5, fashion page; *Azat Hatyn*, 1936, N 24, fashion page.
44 *Azat Hatyn*, 1936, N 12, p. 8.
45 Красная Башкирия, Уфа, 1947.
46 After 1939 “Azat Hatyn” started to be published using Cyrillic alphabet in place of Latin- “Азат Хатын”.
47 Азат Хатын, 1958, N 2, p. 24; Азат Хатын, 1958, N 1; p. 25.
ments like ornaments and headscarves seem “imposed” on the fashionable tight and short dresses.48

Based on amateur photographs from private collections that were shown to me in the process of the interviews, it is possible to conclude that the modernization of women’s attire seems to be successfully realized towards the end of the period in question. Photographs suggest that young city women in western dress from Moscow and Ufa look rather similar. However, frequently their appearance is somewhat outdated compared with Western/capitalist countries.49 In photographs collected in Moscow and Ufa women usually wear a modern hairstyle and are frequently presented in sport clothes. Thus, it is possible to assume that new norms of beauty based on rationality, fashion and consumption, rather than on ethnic traditions and religion, became very important to people.

With this assumption as a starting point, the next section is devoted to an in-depth analysis of memories of the erasure of the differences in appearance in the process of Soviet cultural modernization. This will help explain how the participants in this process regarded beauty norms and practices.

Fashion, taste and kulturnost in memories

The beauty practices of the young years was a topic welcomed by the interviewees who recalled how they sewed or “got hold of” nice dresses, coats and shoes (since it was difficult to buy dresses during the period of a shortage of goods50). They showed pictures where they were wearing “that dress” or hair style, and remembered situations when they were young and attractive for men. A large part of the interview materials considers periods when there was a lack of clothes (particularly during 1940s), including high prices and efforts to care about appearances in the homes. In spite of the importance of and interconnection between these topics in the presentation of the practices of beauty, this article focuses on the contexts of memories of moments when ideas of backwardness, culturednes, modernization, and ethnic and religious differences came to the fore.

In my analysis I use the intersectionality approach that has been described in works by Nina Lykke.51 In analyzing women’s stories about beauty I pay special attention to connections between femininity and education, social status and “cultural tradition” (the last is understood here as a combination of geographic, religious and ethnic identities). Central to my analysis are conversations with 5 informants interviewed in Ufa (F and P), Saratov (J) and Moscow (B and U). Their education range from high (in the case of F, P, B) and secondary (U and J). The native language of two informants (F and P) is Bashkir, of the others Russian. Among those who named Russian as their native language are U (Tatar from city in the Urals) and B (most possibly mixed Jewish-Russian origin). However, in the process of my analysis I do not take

ethnicity, education or religious adherence for granted, but I investigate how femininity and beauty normativities are co-enacted with changing categories of social self-identification.

If we consider the stories of two of my older, educated informants, it is possible to find certain similarities in their presentations of beauty normativities and their ways of incorporating modernity into every-day beauty practices. B, the oldest of my informants (born in 1919), presented herself as coming from a “quite cultured” family. B’s mother was an actress, but by the time of B’s adolescence her mother and step-father were living together with B in Kazan and could be defined as party cadres. After getting married, B and her husband moved to a Russian-Mordovian village in Tatarstan where she worked first as a teacher, and later (after her husband was called to front in 1942) as a school principal.

B presented her childhood as a rather happy one, and mentioned that as a child she was reluctant to wear a dress that resembled somebody else’s. B. attributed it to her family’s “culturedness” and their educated taste. She also told a story about her clothing practices in the countryside, which showed that good taste and a “cultured” look was very important.

I was walking through the village in my high-heeled shoes. Once a month I had to walk to the district administration in order to bring a report. This was a distance of 20 kilometers from my village. I would put on bast shoes [лапти52]. When I arrived there, I put my bast shoes away in my briefcase and put on the high-heeled shoes. There I was walking in my shoes with an appropriate appearance. On the way back I was wearing my bast shoes again...

From this passage we may conclude that in B’s understanding, “culturedness” was particularly important in places where (Soviet) authorities were present. At the same time, however, B was convinced that people around her were not able to understand her feminine taste.

Nobody paid attention...it was so sad! All my clothes were...well... I was from that kind of family; I wore crêpe de Chine, chiffon. All of it was totally uninteresting for the kolkhoz people.

On the basis of these two passages it possible to conclude also that “culturedness”, in the case of B, could be interpreted as including a taste for well-made and stylish clothes, a feminine look and a high social status.

However, B’s picture of the world referred not only to an opposition between people with an educated taste and non-cultured village people as a whole, but it included “other”, different cultures. After answering my question about her pupils’ use of earrings, she told me that girls were expected not to wear earrings or jewellery to school. However, if the mother of some pupil would come to her and say that body decorations like earrings were “their tradition”, she would allow those pupils to wear them. However, it seems that “their traditional” culture, in this case, was seen as inferior compared with the “culture” she represented herself.

A second informant, F, was born in 1939 in the family of a Soviet trade-union activist who was arrested in 1947, as a consequence of a political accusation, and spent 8 years in a camp.53 In contrast to B, who had a fairly unproblematic city childhood in Kazan, F’s adolescence was connected with suffering and deprivations; as a wife of a political prisoner, F’s mother had to

52 In this case “bast shoes” did not necessarily mean literally traditional wicker shoes (лапти), but was used also as pejorative name for different kinds of ugly, self-made shoes.
53 F’s father came back from camp only in 1956.
leave the city in Urals for a miserable life in a kolkhoz, where there was a shortage of
clothes, as was the case in many places in the post-war period. After finishing school in 1956,
F decided to study in ashkent, mainly because of her idea of Central Asia as a place where “it
is warm, where you hardly need to wear clothes, and where tomatoes cost 40 kopeks and
bread is also cheap”.

In spite of F’s social status which, in contrast to B’s, was mainly that of a victim, she man-
aged to get an “unproblematic” Soviet career (she was a Komsomol member, a teacher, a
school inspector and, at the end of her life, she even worked in the Bashkir ministry of educa-
tion). Several times during the interview F showed herself as a supporter of the dominant dis-
courses on look. It is particularly visible in her story about the fight with petite-bourgeois°
habits in college.

_We had this campaign. [against philistinism – YG.] If somebody would perm their hair, wear
too extravagant clothes, we would question her: Why are you wearing that? It wasn’t like ev-
everyday conversation, but a Komsomol meeting. It would happen, for example, if somebody wore
a skirt that was too short, or something overly pretentious, for example a very low neck._

Later F also told me about the importance of a “strict dress” in school and said that if one of
her pupils came to school with a ring she would call her parents to come to school.

In the continuation of her story, F showed a certain similarity with B’s attitudes to beauty and
culture. Beauty for F meant a good taste and a sense of individuality. At some point in her
story, F showed that she took pride in her appearance.

_I was fashionably dressed. I could allow myself a dress covering my feet when nobody was
wearing these kind of dresses. I usually had an original hair style and was styling my hair dif-
ferently. [...] Once I made a dress with a rectangle neck. A rectangle neck, at that time it was
just [shows with her voice and body that it was something very remarkable]_

In contrast to B, F made a different distinction between people like her and others– in her
story, the others are rather Uzbeks who wore “national dresses” and did not have “very good
customs”.°°

However, besides being a victim of Stalinism and being successful in her professional life,
interview materials suggest another possible interpretation of F’s life, including beauty nor-
mativities.

_I was active. And I would never believe that I could become like this from that downtrodden
girl. It is only Allah says some fast words of gratitude that are difficult to understand on the
tape]. He opened a way for me._

In different parts of the interview F recalled that her mother taught her to pray in Arabic, that
female college students tried to observe “appropriateness” (including having rather long
dresses°°) and that the “Russian girls” in the dormitory were dressed differently – highlighting

°° In Russian – _мешанство._
°°° In her story F mentioned the tradition of showing bed linen after the first wedding night, and polygamy.
°°°° This suggests another interpretation of F’s very special long dress – it is possible to suppose that F was trying
to follow some “traditional” recommendations and incorporate religious moral standards into modern dress.
their waist, wearing very wide or very narrow skirts. Thus, it is possible to suppose that the Muslim religion was an important source for F’s identity and beauty normativity.

The story of J. from Saratov (born in 1924) differs from the two previous ones, when it comes to her social success and social mobility. She was born in a Russian peasant family and tragically lost her father during the flight from famine\(^{57}\) to a neighbouring region. After finishing 7 years of school, she moved to Saratov in order to study medicine. However, not being able to afford the course, she transferred to an accountant course, and after 6 months of education she started working as an accountant in a communal system, where she remained almost all her life.

As she describes her practices of beauty, J. makes a clear difference between an “urban” and a “village” dress. Village dressing is defined by her as “clean, but not refined”, while the city gave her an opportunity to look “nice”. J happily tells about the opportunity to look nice in the city: even during the war (in 1943) hairdresser’s salons were opened in Saratov, where J. could get a very fashionable perm. Also, despite earning very little money and bringing up a child without being married in the 1950s, she could buy a full fox collar from her colleague from work using quotas.

From the description of J’s clothing practices, one may conclude that she sees herself as belonging to a (“modern?”) generation that is interested in style, in contrast to the “generation” just before her. Showing a picture of her and her sister, who was only 10 years older, J told me that her sister wore her hair parted in the middle all her life, while J. herself curled her hair in various ways.

The stories of the two younger informants who now live in Moscow seem to confirm that international (Western) fashion helped define beauty normativity for young women in the 1960s. P was born in a Bashkir village in 1939 and U in an industrial city in the Urals in 1947.\(^{58}\) After finishing school P. started her education in the Ufa pedagogical college, where she graduated as a teacher. U was born in a Tatar family (in the beginning of the interview she presented herself as a “russified Tatar”). Her father was a qualified worker and her mother was a waitress in a restaurant. U graduated from a vocational college in Ufa and worked as an engineer in a factory. In contrast to many older informants, P and U’s lives were characterized by a higher degree of stability and security, since they had almost no option but to go through a secondary education system.

U told a remarkable story about Western designs, home-made versions of these models, and the pleasure connected with the idea of appearing in these clothes in public. This story is connected with a film about Babette\(^{59}\) and the appearance of the film’s leading character who became a symbol of sex appeal.

There was this film about Babette. This was when it all started. This kind of ribbon [points to her head]. The special hairstyle was inspired from that film. With a fringe and here’s the white ribbon. And the hair had considerable volume. It all started with her, didn’t it? Of course we

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\(^{57}\) In Russia the famine as a result of the forced collectivization in 1932-1933 was particularly hard in the Volga region.

\(^{58}\) U moved to Moscow only after retiring.

\(^{59}\) «Бабетта идет на войну» - shortened version of the French film Babette s’en va-t-en guerre where Brigitte Bardot played the lead role. (Christian-Jaque, 1959).
had to imitate it! The skirts were called "babettka". We put on stiff skirts, everybody became Babettes. [pause] We wore, you know, “marlevka” [a type of light, thin cotton fabric] that appeared in the shops. It was stiff and was a nice cloth, covered with flowers. Underneath you would put on stiff gauze! That’s how Babette looked! It was such a chic dress! Everybody started to wear it.

P. also presented herself as a person concerned with looking nice while in college. She told me about how she died her hair – “during one year it was of all colors, from black to blond”. Also, she was a stilyaga⁶⁰, wearing very narrow skirts – “boys were laughing and showing how girls are entering a tram” (P. showed how difficult it was to raise her leg on the stairs).

At the same time, when talking about her work as a teacher in the 1970s, in similarity with B and F, P stressed that she did not tolerate too much make-up or decorations among her pupils.

Despite the obvious acceptance of a modern, urban, stylish and fashionable look, even younger informants reveal the contradictory effects of the modernization of look.

U’s story implies that today she is interested in traditions and religion (she is reading the Quran, has attempted fasting, and regrets not speaking Tatar). However, she still sees traditional clothes (most probably, according to a Soviet discourse on allowing “backwardness” in the elderly) as something belonging to another generation and a non-modern way of life (in similarity with J), in her phrase, that of “old women” (babushki).

Elderly women were wearing them [scarfs and kerchiefs] and now they are doing it again. My mother-in-law was born in 1917 and when she came to live with us, she had lived for 76 years in a Bashkir village. Well, it was not really a village; they had a sovkhoz.⁶¹ There were Bashkirs and Tatars there. She was an ardent Tatar, but she did not have anything like this. Even in her wardrobe you could not find anything. Maybe just one item, really – her clothes were mostly green. Perhaps this green color was characteristic for elderly women.

At the same time she thought the fashion of her youth strange, with reference, for instance, to her wearing a mini-dress at a wedding celebration.

On the other hand, in the interview with U there are further complexities of beauty normativity. Drawing a line between “village girls” who studied together with her in a technical school, and herself as a modern city inhabitant, U said that the first thing they did after coming to the city was to cut their braids off. Collected material from other interviews show that to cut the braids off was a very symbolic act in Soviet beauty practices: it symbolised both the entrance into adulthood and changing “backward”/village norms to progressive/urban ones. However, it is very interesting that in this case “village girls” were accompanied by their ethnic nomination – “Bashkir”. Thus it is possible to suppose that U here draws a line not only between urban and village, but also between modern/city/Russified and backward/village/Bashkir.


⁶¹ The Soviet name for a state agricultural enterprise.
Furthermore, it was P who expressed more clearly than the others of my transcribed informants the possibility of explaining modernization in terms of the colonial domination of the Russian-speaking centre over traditional every-day practices in the periphery:

National traditions very soon became more Russian. [Pause] Probably they were somehow suppressed by parents. Maybe I am wrong.

Summary

The presented material shows that Soviet femininity may be studied from the perspective of a cross-sectional analysis. Beautifying practices in Soviet Russia in the 1930s to the 1960s were connected to the complex interplay of different social categories and different interpretations of “culture”, “culturedness” and “tradition”. However, beauty normativity did not presuppose separated elements, but was a system of rules and meanings which women simultaneously internalized and resisted.

The analysis of a cross-section of gender with a performative presentation of “culture”, “education”, “religion” and “ethnicity” on the level of every-day practices also contributes to studies of the effects of Soviet social, cultural and national policies. The actualization of ethnicity through “tradition” as a response to practices of gender discrimination, as well as the construction of hierarchies among women through the use of “culture” and “education” discourses, are only a few examples.

Many modern attitudes to beauty (including hygiene practices and the education of taste) stem from the Western social and political agenda and were incorporated into the Soviet discourses about female beauty. Although it would seem likely that those attitudes would symbolize ideas of modernization and progress, they are remembered by many of my informants as “genuinely” Soviet norms of new “cultural” appearances and forms of body care. However, as the interviews with Bashkir women demonstrate, this modernization/Westernization/Sovietization could be questioned and, sometimes, reinterpreted as the continuation of the pre-Soviet colonial politics toward the periphery and towards non-Russian ethnic groups.

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62 During my last trip to Ufa in the spring of 2006 I had less formal conversations with two Tatar women who told me that in the post-war period young girls who were too eager to follow city fashion were named “Maria”, a name clearly suggesting the “Russiness” of their beauty practices.


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