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The Dynamics of Clothing Changes, an Aspect of the Subculture after the USSR's Collapse

Ilya M. Shmelev

Some informal youth associations ceased to exist with the collapse of the USSR, but others continue to operate to this day, although the moral convictions of members have changed and modernized. This article describes the types, features and differences of some modern Russian subcultures as well as subcultures of the Soviet era. The author explores the process of transformation of traditional ideas about the place of a young person in society, as well as gender relations and functions of an individual in the youth environment. Also analyzed is the active development of a new stage of formation and development of criminal subculture in Russia, which belongs within the parameter of a “classical” criminal subculture. Having considered youth subcultures, the author identifies styles that have become constant.

YOUTH SUBCULTURES AFTER THE COLLAPSE

With the political collapse, youth movements began to receive even greater publicity in the Russian mass media; they spread to all parts of the country, were introduced, borrowed and integrated culturally (Razinskiy 2015). Subcultures acquire an ever freer and more crime-friendly character, as drugs, alcohol and other illegal substances permeate the youth environment. Existing subcultures continue these activities even as new ones emerge.

In the early 1990s in Russia people also got interested in *anime*. This interest had arisen in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. From the moment it appeared in Russia it began to burgeon, gaining popularity and attracting audiences. This subcultural interest has managed to remain down to the present, and continues to fascinate new generations of the young (Novikov and Antonov 2018).

Then in the mid-1990s break-dancing and graffiti became popular avenues of expression for young people in Russia. The passion for graffiti came from New York, where break-dancing and graffiti are features of a hip-hop

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Figure 1. Countercultural “party” at the end of the Soviet collapse. (Photographer: Maxim Mirovich, 1988).

subculture. Together with these interests parcour and skateboarding began to develop. The peak of popularity of such an activity as parcour came in 2006, due to the release of the *District 13* film (Morel 2004). At various periods skateboarding was popular in one or another subculture. For a long time it had been an attribute of punk culture; but later, skateboarding began to coalesce as a distinct subcultural activity, and now it is a completely separate independent movement with its own characteristics, principles, aims, attributes, symbols and meaning (Figure 1).

Some activities (Komsomol activists of Soviet times, or political trends in post-Perestroika Russia) can be considered only within the framework of a specific cultural and historical situation (Vygotsky 1999). Also there are communities (of nostalgists, Lyubers, members of short-lived religious or political groups, and *emos*) that have a brief lifetime, limited to just a few years (Alaniz 2016; Talaspayeva et al. 2017).

So far as their clothing is concerned, there commonly are narrow-minded ideas about what clothing is proper to this or that subculture. For example, a person interested in young hipsters “at the level of general interest,” but who has never actually seen them in person, can describe how such people should be “dressed right” as an “exemplary” hippie, punk, skinhead, Goth or *emo*. It would be a

mistake to attribute such a stereotype of their image to the whole subculture (which nonetheless is often done in insufficiently qualified research).

As a rule participants in subcultures dress quite diversely in reality, and don't conform to stereotypes of "how it should be." When observing this or that party, it often seems that a common style for the participants is missing, as each of them dresses in his own way and does not try to ape a general sub-cultural stereotype. Even so, quite a few members of a subculture do wear "typical" clothing. For example, while attending meetings of youth political organizations in 2006, the author noted that about 15 percent of members of the National Bolshevik Party (the NBP) wore clothing with camouflage coloring (either a jacket or trousers, for only very rarely is all this worn together). Roughly the same situation can be observed at meetings of avant-garde Communist Youth (ACY). But 20–25 percent of the members of the Union of Communist Youth (UCY) come to their meetings in suits with ties. As far as we can judge, these percentages are large enough for us to talk about paramilitary clothing being typical for the NBP and ACY, and "decent-looking" suits as typical for the UCY. The majority of members of the NBP, ACY and UCY and other youth communities' dress is similar to that of "ordinary" young Russian people who are not adopting a subcultural style of clothing (Omelchenko and Sabirova 2016). For example, subcultural styles are often determined not only by fashion, colors and brands of clothes, but also by the general attitude toward them. Thus, in some communities, people neglect their clothing and dress sloppily, whereas in others, on the contrary, people tend toward respectability and smartness. Social class may be a consideration here.

The attitude toward subcultural clothing varies in different spheres of activity. For some youth communities it is sufficient to distinguish between specifically subcultural and casual/leisure activity (Soboleva 2018); that is, the subculture has an activity around which a group has formed (its title, in other words, coming from the activity's name). Bikers are united by riding motorcycles, role-playing gamers are united by their interest in role-playing games, sports fans are united by support for their favorite sports clubs, and members of groups formed on the basis of liking tourism are united by hiking together. In the framework of specifically subcultural activities, as a rule, they wear special clothing: bikers wear clothing for high-speed driving, role-playing gamers wear outfits corresponding to a role in the game, sports fans wear scarves and hats with club symbols or colors, tourists prefer clothing appropriate for hiking, etc. In casual or leisure communication, wearing subcultural clothing is "unnecessary." Having met in the city "for a cup of tea," as they might put it, representatives of the subcultures mentioned will likely be dressed like "ordinary" young people. Special attention is paid to subcultural clothing rather in spheres of subcultural activities that imply demonstrative behavior (Makhotkina et al. 2016; Ponomariov and Rud 2018).

Attention to subcultural symbolism and to subcultural clothing is in particular observed at the margins of a subculture, especially among newcomers who are just entering the community: even if they talk about having little acquaintance with the group's norms and show low levels of involvement in its

activities, they tend to declare their involvement in the group in the simplest way, namely through the adoption of appropriate clothing.

Being a part of the subculture, a young man forms by means of clothing an individual system of ideas about himself as a person; he realizes his “need for personalization” (Petrovskiy 2010). The young person seeks to find his identity among other significant people. A feeling of community and belonging to a “special” circle of like-minded people allows a member of their subculture to affirm and build an image of his or her personality, which is especially important in an individual’s social formation (Petrovskiy 2010). A subculture provides conditions for constructing the boundaries of an individual (limit, transition, connection), defining where his personal space begins and ends, where his own is and where others are, where and for whom the representative of the subculture means something, and for whom it does not (Petrovskiy 2009, 2010). Style creates an avenue to acquire clear social and psychological boundaries, norms and rules of behavior; with like-minded people and others who don’t share these values sometimes becoming the cause of street conflicts and fighting.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF STREET YOUTH

Looking at youth street-communities in post-Soviet cities, the author found that, despite the territorial remoteness from one another and the absence of intergroup communication, they were structurally quite similar to each other. Also one can identify a general style of clothing (Arpentieva 2017). Since these associations were on the street, they used the kind of clothing that would be convenient to wear there: “We dressed like this—easily. Sweatpants were for winter and summer. In summer, we wore sports gear and sneakers; and in winter, padded jackets” (Gribust 2018).

“Boyish” clothing had to be that which neither gets dirty nor constrains movements, and is not expensive. Within street company strength, agility and sportiness were appreciated, so everyday sportswear was often used. So in the above-noted statement sweatpants, sports gear and sneakers were normal. Valuable in street company were characteristics related to masculinity and manhood, which often had a rather coarse aspect to them.

One of the patterns that street teenagers and young adults oriented themselves by was military aesthetics. Army service in those years was a matter of prestige (at least among street youth), and to defer from the service was uncommon (Liebel and Budde 2017; Mikhailov 2017). In this way, there appeared elements of army comportment in youth clothing; for example, with belts: “Soldiers’ belts were valued as weapons, officers’ belts as an element for showing off. A fighter twisted a belt around one hand in one click and then waved a weighty badge like a flail.” Among the “military” items of clothing, in those years, skivvies and tarpaulin boots were valued, and wearing of boots was dictated not so much by military fashion as by ordinary convenience for walking around: “People wore boots—canvas or rubber ones. Moreover, it was

impossible to do without them in Beskudnikovo because it is a new district and the mud was up to the knees.”

The masculine value of street company was to have physical strength and agility. Externally this was demonstrated through interest in sportswear and clothing that is comfortable for extremely energetic street pastimes (Artiomov 2017; Chudnovskaya and Lipatova 2018). There were often conflicts between street associations; an ability to fight was therefore also one of the most important values. With the help of clothing, the unmistakable identification of one’s own people during a fight was assured, especially in cases where members of the same group might not know each other, or in conditions of poor visibility. With this in mind, before a fight they would wear knitted hats of one particular style or tied scarves over their collars.

Appearance and Clothing in the Lyuber Subculture

In the early stages of their existence youth street groups of Lyubertsy, in Moscow *oblast*, differed little from similar groups in other Soviet cities (Belitskaya 2018). They formed a youth sports movement in the 1980s: the basic unifying factor for Lyubers was their participation in power sports, in particular body-building. Consequently they adopted clothing in sports styles: in the warm season it was just sports gear but in winter padded jackets too.

Early in 1987 there appeared a “classic” Lyubers’ outfit, with wide-leg trousers, jacket, light shirt, dark tie and cap (Filina and Cheboksarov 2019). This outfit appeared artificial in many ways, due to the fact that it was described in sensational publications about Lyubers, so the author would be wary of considering it as a reflection of subcultural values. In the mid-1980s Lyubers began to follow a fashion for wide checkered trousers too. But these trousers, the fashion for which emerged “by itself,” were indeed regarded as a reflection of subcultural values. Lyubers belonged to a number of heightened masculine subcultures, the value here being masculinity expressed through force and a peculiar Soviet “rectitude” (Surov 2017). In the 1990s, the Lyubers, and by association Lyubertsy town, formed part of the emerging organized crime syndicates.

In those years, one might hear the opinion that wide-leg trousers are the clothing of a “real man,” as if their width emphasized that inside there was something large and powerful although the trousers chastely hid it from public view. Masculine fans of wide-leg trousers criticized hipsters for wearing tight jeans because they allegedly flaunted their bodies in the open, “like women” (Figure 2). It is noteworthy that the fashion for wide-leg trousers in those years, so far as we can tell, existed mainly in masculine street companies. Thus, for example, they were worn in cities flanking the Volga River that were infamous for their boyish groups (Ilynsky 1992; Sharma 2017).

Image of Bikers in the Early 1990s

An interest in motor sports existed for long among teenagers and young people of the Soviet Union, and it became one of the reasons for the emergence of



Figure 2. Typical appearance and clothing of the Lyubers' subculture. (Source: from the archive of the club "Titan Luber"; <https://lubertsyriamo.ru/article/129354/legendarnye-lyubera-ot-molodezhnogo-dvizheniya-do-obschestvennoj-organizatsii.xl>).

a biker subculture in the mid-1980s; at that time this was a youth movement. The biker's image was borrowed from the West (Kuldova 2016), but biker clothing arose not only from the adoption of a foreign style but also from practical need: "Anyone who wants to ride a motorcycle in our climate will sooner or later dress in leather, sooner or later in black" (Ferreira and Pohl 2012). "It's not showing-off, it's a vital necessity. Any soft, easily soiled and blown materials in a matter of days will be torn to shreds and be smeared forever and will put you to bed with pneumonia. So jackets, leather trousers, leather bandanas, sturdy shoes, leather bells and whistles such as key holders, cigarette holders and other stuff are first a means of survival for the biker, and second, the luxury and freedom to express himself" (Abrech 2018, trans.; Figure 3).

Conditioned by practical necessity, the bikers' gear corresponds to their aesthetic and a romanticized, brutal masculinity. Some people think that representatives of some of the youth subcultures, not opposed to this aesthetic, adopted leather clothing from bikers, as for example, fans of rock music (first of all, the metal-heads).

Skinhead Subculture after the USSR's Collapse

Skinhead subculture emerged in the late 1960s in Britain as a movement of young workers from the provinces. Early skinheads were similar to Soviet street groups, for example, Lyubers of the early 1980s. Although the skinhead clothing is not similar to Soviet street groups in appearance, it was formed according to the same principles: it is practical and comfortable to wear a



Figure 3. Typical bikers of the early 1990s. (Source: USSR Rocker Movement; <http://artland24.ru/53330-rokerskoe-dvizhenie-sssr-11-foto.html>).

bomber or scooter jacket, jeans and work boots on the street (Roberts 2016; Figure 4 here).

Skinhead clothing is comfortable for a fight: heavy boots add force to the kick, and the collar of the bomber jacket is small, so it is believed the enemy is unable to grab it during a fight. “A belt with a big and attractive buckle ... is very often used as a weapon in fighting, so usually skinheads choose heavier buckles. Sometimes the buckle’s edges are sharpened or the buckle itself is filled with lead.” The pugnacity of the Russian skinheads is demonstrated by wearing a massive chain which “is one of the most menacing and common means of in-fighting Sometimes the skinheads buy dog leashes and collars which already have a fixed metal chrome-plated carabiner weighing more than fifty grams.”

Skinheads were much interested in military symbolism, in particular, clothing of camouflage coloring and military boots. Shoelaces carried an additional symbolic burden: it is believed that they identify belonging to one or another group of skinheads. “White shoelaces indicate a supporter of White Power ideology, i.e., a racist. Brown shoelaces—a supporter of the NS ideology, i.e., a neo-Nazi. Red shoelaces indicate a shaven-headed person who adheres to a communist or left-wing orientation.”

Symbolism in the Style of Political Radicals

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a wide range of political youth organizations formed in Russia. In particular, movements of left, ultra-left and



Figure 4. Skinhead subculture after the Soviet collapse. (Source: Article “Skinhead”; https://pikabu.ru/story/britogoloviy_4333628?cid=68997955).

national-Bolshevik orientations appeared. In the clothing of these movements one could note orientation to left-wing values (democratic or revolutionary) as well as references to historic revolutionary prototypes (for example, black and white Palestinian scarves).

In the clothing of radicals, one could strongly sense the influence of a military style. However, that style was not really military but rather that of a soldier or officer—an “urban partisan.” This meant camouflage clothing of khaki color (trousers, jackets, vests and t-shirts), with paramilitary stripes and inscriptions as well as military-style shoes. “I wear nothing but sneakers and combat boots,” said an 18-year-old girl, favoring from the whole range of shoes only military ones (combat boots) and unpretentious sports (sneakers; [Figure 5](#)).

One of the ways to create extreme “partisanship” through clothing is to cover the face during a campaign, as was seen recently in Hong Kong. Kerchiefs (including some with revolutionary symbols), “terrorist” masks with slits for the eyes, or gauze bandages were used for this purpose. Alexey Tsvetkov, who introduced the Russian fashion for this item of clothing, laid out the following ideological justification:

It is necessary to introduce the fashion for masks, so that later, on the police video of riots, no one could be recognized. If the whole country is dressed like this, the dream of anarchists will finally come true: the state will suddenly cease to exist, as citizens will feel completely invulnerable toward the law... The world of masked people is beautiful. No one is immune from being hit with a crowbar on the head, but no one is forbidden to use the same crowbar. Is not this equality? (Tsvetkov [2007](#))



Figure 5. Political activists of a left orientation: Soviet symbolics, the British flag used as a bandage, camouflage and covering of the faces; a May demonstration. (Source: Dmitry Gromov, *What does subcultural clothing show?* <https://www.colta.ru/articles/raznoglasiya/13693-chtokazhyoet-subkulturnaya-odezhda>).

The researcher Aglaya Toporova, describing Saint Petersburg's national Bolsheviks, called them "untidy and ugly dressed." The present author found several interpretations of such a style. First, negligence in clothing was regarded as the consequence of "military-partisan" aesthetics. Secondly, it was explained by the fact that the interests of young radicals are not focused on the material but on the mental, "That one who thinks about the transformation of the social system will not think about clothing." The ideological orientation of radicals (especially on the left) presupposes equality and democracy, therefore equality is to be emphasized through "democratic" clothing. There was also one more explanation (which does not however exclude the previous two): the negligence for their clothing is due to the low incomes of radicals and the disorder in their lives.

In the clothing of "revolutionary" youth groups, black or dark colors dominated, while light colors were proper to the clothing of young pro-Putin activists. This pattern is clearly not accidental: dark colors adumbrate the aesthetics of concealment, oppression, partisan fight and death; light colors, on the contrary, suggest openness, legality, respectability and a positive attitude.



Figure 6. Goths of the mid-1990s in Russia. (Source: Festival of Gothic Music and Culture Wave-Gotik-Treffen in Leipzig; <http://www.restbee.ru/guides/razlichienii-i-prazdniki/festival-ghotichieskoi-muzyki-i-kul-tury-wavie-gotik-trieffien-v-lieptsighie.html> ...).

The Subculture of Goth Clothing

Goth subculture is based on the supposedly “Gothic” aesthetics of mysticism, darkness and death. “For the most part, Goths wear black clothing, dye their fingernails, hair and lips in black color and highlight the eyes.” The average age of those in the subculture in the mid-1990s was around 15–18 years, and it was dominated by girls. The “girlish” nature of the subculture and the desire for artistry and self-expression proper to Goths made for a lot of attention to their appearance, and in particular to their clothing (Figure 6).

Descriptions of the subcultural clothing of Goths (dresses, skirts, corsets, crinolines, jewelry, etc.) are voluminous and detailed. A passion for external self-expression led to the formation within the framework of Gothic aesthetics of numerous style tendencies: thus antique, Renaissance, romantic and Victorian Goths, slaves of corporations, cybergoths, glittergoths, Gypsies, hippies, fetishists, punk Goths, Western Goths, vampires and androgynes are all mentioned (Antonova and Patosha 2017).

CONCLUSION

Over the following decade youth communities underwent changes that were manifested in subcultural clothing. Attitudes toward this clothing have changed with the years, as Russian society has become more tolerant of

nonstandard appearance, and the opinion that “everyone dresses the way he wants” began to catch on increasingly in the public consciousness. A young man dressed like a “hipster” already has much less risk of getting a critical remark from seniors or a punch in the jaw from peers. The attitude toward clothing has changed: if earlier wearing an unusual outfit was an extreme practice, even a provocation, now the “provocativeness” has decreased significantly and things have normalized themselves.

As a result, clothing of hipster youth subcultures is increasingly becoming an object of industrial production in Russia. If earlier on hipsters made clothing and accessories on their own, as a rule now everyone who wishes to do so can buy imported or domestic clothing in a specialized shop at his own discretion, or even order a batch of clothing for his community. Having considered the complexes of youth clothing for half a century, it is possible to identify some styles that are reproduced by different subcultures decade after decade and can be seen as constants of sorts.

Clothing appropriate for a fight is now traditional for men’s “street” groups where strength, agility and pugnacity are appreciated and a brutal, masculine ideal of a “real guy” is cultivated. In Soviet street companies, the “clothing for a fight” was understood to be sportswear. In different subcultures, there are cases of the incorporation in an outfit of heavy objects that could be used as weapons, for example, chains or belts with heavy buckles (for metal-heads); this also includes heavy boots (for skinheads). Clothing that does not restrict movement is also appreciated (by the Lyubers and rappers).

A democratic style is used by groups with an accentuated indifference toward material values or with respect to spiritual and intellectual values. Back in Soviet times “democratic” clothing characterized members of youth groups as art. More recently this tendency has not been preserved: a survey, conducted by us among students at one of the Moscow universities, did not reveal any familiarity with this type. Nowadays a neglectful attitude toward clothing can be observed among participants of politicized youth movements. The democratic style is used by groups who demonstrate an accentuated indifference to material values and also with respect to spiritual or intellectual values.

Respectability of clothing can result from its severity and/or high cost. Wearing formal clothing is intended to emphasize integrity, activity and orientation toward success in life. In Soviet times, this style of clothing was adopted by Komsomol workers. In modern Russia, strictly respectable clothing is used in some professional collectives (and firms having a strict dress code often employ young people). “Decent” clothing is also *de rigueur* in some religious organizations.

Expensive brands of clothing suggest a different perspective on youth respectability. Through this style, elitism and a high level of income are indicated. In Soviet times wearing branded clothing was a way to demonstrate one’s involvement in channels of deficit redistribution; in modern Russia the example of groups that practise wearing expensive branded clothing is to be seen at some “fashionable” club parties.

The repeatability of styles of subcultural clothing for youth follows from the repeatability of types of subculture. Arising in different cultural and historic situations, they attract into their ranks young people who have the same psychosocial personality type (i.e., same life attitudes, level of aggressiveness, anxiety, etc.), people belonging to similar social strata (intellectuals, workers, etc.) and inclined to similar activities (art, sports, religion, social protest, etc.). The associations based on typical recurring factors form a system of values that is repeated regardless of the differences of cultural-historic situations. Thus typical value systems are associated with typical and repetitive styles of clothing.

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