



Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War

Julie Summers (Contributor)

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In September 1939, just three weeks after the outbreak of war, Gladys Mason wrote briefly in her diary about events in Europe: 'Hitler watched German siege of Warsaw. City in flames.' And, she continued, 'Had my wedding dress fitted. Lovely.'

For Gladys Mason, and for thousands of women throughout the long years of the war, fashion was not simply a distraction, but a necessity - and one they weren't going to give up easily. In the face of bombings, conscription, rationing and ludicrous bureaucracy, they maintained a sense of elegance and style with determination and often astonishing ingenuity. From the young woman who avoided the dreaded 'forces bloomers' by making knickers from military-issue silk maps, to Vogue's indomitable editor Audrey Withers, who balanced lobbying government on behalf of her readers with driving lorries for the war effort, Julie Summers weaves together stories from ordinary lives and high society to provide a unique picture of life during the Second World War.

As a nation went into uniform and women took on traditional male roles, clothing and beauty began to reflect changing social attitudes. For the first time, fashion was influenced not only by Hollywood and high society but by the demands of industrial production and the pressing need to 'make-do-and-mend'. Beautifully illustrated and full of gorgeous detail, Fashion on the Ration lifts the veil on a fascinating era in British fashion

Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War Details

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From Reader Review Fashion on the Ration: Style in the Second World War for online ebook

Kathleen says

Well researched and charmingly written - it is so interesting to know how folks (women) managed in a different era. Recommended read for all the Home-Ec folks (like me) who want (or need) spirit buoying in our quest to live a sensible, considerate up-cycled life.

Sue says

I bought this book because I had missed the exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, which I would love to have seen. The book was my consolation gift to myself. It follows the development of fashion and cosmetics during the war years (1939-45).

The UK, being a small and over-crowded island, has always imported a lot of goods, including fabric and fashion. That almost entirely stopped during the war, plus much of our own production was required for the war effort - uniforms for the troops in particular. As a result, there was very little available for people to buy for themselves and their families. Clothes were severely rationed and the phrase Make Do and Mend was born. People became creative and inventive in turning their husband's old suits into dresses or, as one lady boasts, making two dresses out of an old chintz dust sheet.

Of course, in that period, people had far fewer clothes to start with than we do now, so the few clothes they did have wore out relatively quickly, with very little chance of obtaining a replacement. Parties were held to swap clothes and younger children had altered hand-me-downs from their brothers and sisters. (And we think that re-use and recycle is a modern concept?!). This was also a time when there were strict standards and expectations about clothing. At one school the teacher was horrified at the thought that a young girl might present a bouquet of flowers to an honoured guest without gloves on and a pair was hurriedly found from somewhere.

Similarly, women believed strongly that they had a duty to present themselves well, with hair and make-up done at all times, yet cosmetics and hair products became very hard to obtain. Hair at this time was usually kept long, and it's interesting that the fashion magazines became mouthpieces for the government at times during this period, showing celebrities with short hair and simplified make-up, to encourage ordinary people to do the same. There had been some horrific accidents in factories with women getting their long hair caught in machinery.

The author combines facts and figures from manufacturers and magazines with diary entries from individuals to give a comprehensive yet heart-felt account of how women (it's almost exclusively written about women's perspectives) coped with the conflicting principles of reducing consumption and maintaining personal standards to keep up morale.

I've only just finished this book but will definitely read it again, and am pleased to find that the author has written several other books (my TBR is just never going to go down is it...?!).

mercedes says

A great look into the lives and fashions of women during the war. The author is clearly educated, with detailed knowledge about every issue surrounding every garment available! (or, rather, unavailable). I feel like I gained insights and learned new information I had no idea about before, if you're interested in WWII, fashion throughout the years, or both, I recommend this!

Janet says

I have never been interested in fashion. But I was fascinated by the story of women who lived through six years of war, having to "make do and mend" to keep themselves and their children not only clothed but looking good. And this during a period when the strictures on women's wear were writ in stone! (When I told my daughter in law about the chapter on corsets, we were laughing, but my husband said, "Why didn't they just quit wearing them?" Men!)

This book is a tribute to the strength of these women. But I wonder about one thing: the author mentions that the American G.I.'s came in with money and a load of nylons. How did they get them, since stockings were rationed in the U.S., too?

I loved this book, because I love the period.

Marrynka says

Catchy insight into British fashion industry during war times. Even though it is a non-fiction book devoted to quite specific topic, it was easy to read, because the author tells all the facts as stories. They have conducted a thorough research which is visible in the whole book - e.g. citations from diaries are often presented which makes all the stories personal and relatable and one also learns a lot about home front and life of civilians in general during these hard times.

C.G. says

Like all of Summers books, I thoroughly enjoyed reading "Fashion on the Ration" and learning more about the often overlooked history of WWII on the British home front. Summers has a very pleasing writing style, her research is outstanding, and her passion for WWII history shines through. If you're looking for a historical nonfiction that's totally worth your time... look no further.

Anna says

This book accompanied an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum that I intended to go and see but unfortunately never did. The austere simplicity of utility fashion makes it one of my favourite eras of style (along with the mid-18th century and the 1870s because I also love extravagantly wide-skirted silk gowns).

It's a brief, entertaining account of men's and women's fashion from 1939 to 1945. Although as social history it lacks rather in depth, there were enough charming anecdotes and new bits of information that I enjoyed it very much. For example, I hadn't realised the difficulties engendered by rationing corsets and the intense dislike women had for the available substitutes. Not surprisingly, it is difficult to make a decent foundation garment with limited-to-no elastic, rubber, and steel boning. On the other hand, most other utility garments were very successful. Interesting issues discussed include the ways in which clothes rationing narrowed the class divide and the sudden social acceptability of trousers-wearing by British women.

Summers covers both the institutional context of fashion on the ration and some first-hand responses to it. I would have liked a wider range of the latter, however the length of the book somewhat constrains this. Pictures are deployed judiciously in the narrative and definitely enhance it. Memorably, there's an image of an absolutely exquisite underwear set one woman had made from an RAF pilot's silk map of Northern Italy. As a fashion history of WWII, 'Fashion on the Ration' is well worth a read. It made me regret anew not seeing the exhibition.

Sonia Bellhouse says

An insight into what life was like for the women left behind by war. Fashion may be a frivolous topic but how we look can affect how we feel and women have always striven to look their best. Gave me a real appreciation of the talent and creativity of ordinary women.

Madeleine McDonald says

A fascinating book. The author has a readable style and trawled through official records, the archives of Vogue, and private diaries to discover how women not only coped with clothes rationing in the Second World War but how they kept their spirits up by giving old clothes a new twist. It is almost impossible now to imagine the strict class divide and the formality of the prewar years. In 1941, in view of the shortage of stockings, the Archbishop of Canterbury announced that women could attend church hatless and stockingless "without impropriety". Uniforms and "utility clothing" blurred the old class distinctions. For many women from poor families, uniform was the first time they had a set of new clothes rather than hand-me-downs. Some of the most charming anecdotes in the book concern the ingenuity deployed for brides to look special on their wedding day.

Fang McGee says

Well-researched; a number of threads that could have used further clarity/explication, though.

Heather says

This was an interesting and enjoyable read. It doesn't just focus on the perceived drabness of wartime clothes and make do and mend. It also touched on the women and men - and how they maintained their spirits while creating styles and looking as good as they could, or dared.

Rachel Deakin says

Excellent. Love the evolution of fashion in this period. Thanks Jen!

Lindsay says

I would have liked to have seen the exhibition that this book was written to accompany but sadly they never venture out into the sticks. In the spirit of WWII I have 'made do' with the book instead!

I'd recommend it to anyone with an interest in fashion or women's history, it's full of interesting facts and anecdotes. Some of which I've never come across before - for example story of the philanthropist who donated sanitary towels for servicewomen for the duration of the war. I'm embarrassed to say it had never occurred to me to wonder how women managed!

Kimberley Ash says

Practically perfect in every way. Double the size and add more photos and it'll be absolutely perfect.

Moirra says

Who would have thought the challenges of dressing well in wartime could be so interesting? Julie Summers has an easy style and deep research into various topics, especially around WW2 in the U K. Sourcing material, restrictions on pleats and tucks and the controversy over the banishing of trouser turnips are dealt with: not to mention the dreaded, baggy lisle stockings!

For entertaining and informative Social History go to Julie Summers!
