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Excerpted from Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

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Zooting Around the World

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"Some authorities feel that the only thing to do is to let the whole mysterious business wear itself out and disappear through inner exhaustion of its possibilities," reported Agnes Meyer in the wake of the Los Angeles riot.[1] In fact, it was much harder than those authorities thought to shrug off the zoot suit. During the war and for decades thereafter, this style traveled across time and place, appealing to youths whose lives otherwise diverged. It turned up in wartime Great Britain and Australia, despite orders by their governments to conserve cloth for the duration. Bahamian farm hands, brought to Florida to pick crops, surprised their hosts by appearing in zoot suits. Canada had its own versions of zoot-suit unrest in the summer of 1944, and in occupied France, *zazous* sporting long coats and narrow trousers outraged officials. After the war, young people in other countries—from the *stiliagi* of the Soviet Union to the *tsotsis* of South Africa—picked up and adapted elements of an extreme style that had originated in American culture.

The zoot suit was never a leading cultural product or intentional export of the United States in an era when the nation's films, music, and consumer goods were reaching around the globe. Yet this seemingly ephemeral fashion traveled to many places during and after World War II. It is a telling example of a commodity that circulated

without marketing campaigns and advertising but rather along obscure routes and through informal networks of influence—a process that has likely been more common than studies of consumer culture have recognized. Captivating the imagination of young men across continents, the zoot suit's strange features and hybrid identity—as a generational marker, an emblem of racial-ethnic minorities, and a quintessential American style—made it an unstable container of meanings. Although American journalists and commentators called *zazous*, *stiliagi*, and other fashion-conscious youth "zoot suiters," this was not the term used by the young men themselves. They made extreme styles their own, although there was always something in them that referenced an imagined America and served as a touchstone even in indigenous cultural and political contexts. As in the United States, these young people sparked public controversies and official concern over antisocial behavior and the role of youth in securing the future. The specifics of these debates differed significantly from nation to nation as the war years gave way to peacetime reconstruction. Inevitably, the American zoot suit—or a reasonable facsimile—became the focal point of larger desires and fears.

* * *

The zoot suit quickly appeared among the closest neighbors of the United States, part of the flow of goods, images, and people in the Western hemisphere. The Mexican borderland was believed by many to be the *pachucos*' point of origin. Although the zoot suit was most apparent in Los Angeles, cross-border migration and communication of style and behavior made drapes and pegged pants familiar to Mexican youths by the early 1940s. Still, the Los Angeles riot in 1943 led Mexican officials and the public to scrutinize the style in a way they had not before. The attacks on *pachucos* threatened to undermine cooperation between Mexico and the United States, which had recently resulted in trade and labor agreements, including the Bracero Program

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that enabled Mexican migrants to work in American agriculture. The Mexican government responded cautiously to the events in Los Angeles, expressing concern but issuing no official protest to U.S. officials. The nationalist press criticized the government's inaction, and five hundred students marched in the streets of Mexico City, protesting American racism, President Franklin Roosevelt, and Ezequiel Padilla, the head of the Mexican foreign ministry.[2]

The zoot suit style did not spark a riot in Mexico—although there were reports of a few men beaten and stripped of their drapes—but it did contribute to an ongoing debate about the meaning of Mexican identity, or *Mexicanidad.* Even as they decried white Americans' violence in Los Angeles, newspapers distanced themselves from the *pachucos,* who were not seen as authentic Mexicans. Covering the riot, *La Prensa*'s headline summarized the problem: "Without Being Truly Mexicans, They Are an Embarrassment to Our Republic." This article was unusual for perceiving the *pachuco* as a degenerate racial mixture; more commonly writers cast such youths as existing between two worlds, the children of working-class, uneducated migrants, too Americanized to be Mexican. For Mexicans, historian Richard Griswold del Castillo argues, the zoot suit riots made Mexican American ethnic culture visible, and it was a distressing sight.[3]

After the war, renowned writer Octavio Paz would open *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* his meditation on Mexican identity, with a consideration of "The *Pachuco* and Other Extremes." Paz saw the *pachuco* up close when he lived in Los Angeles from 1943 to 1945. He was at once mesmerized and repulsed. To Paz, the *pachuco* had "lost his whole inheritance" as a Mexican, and yet he had not been accepted by American society. His "grotesque dandyism"—a disguise that "both hides him and points him out"—was not a protest against social injustice but rather a demonstration of willfulness and difference. Changing "ordinary apparel into art" conveyed mixed messages of aggression and nihilism, vitality and desire. In the United States, "everyone agrees in finding something hybrid about him, something disturbing and fascinating," wrote Paz, but

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to Mexicans, the *pachuco* could only be seen as an extreme deviation. Paz articulated anxieties that had circulated among Mexican intellectuals and leaders about the nature of national identity and their country's troubling cultural encounters with the United States.[4]

Nevertheless, the zoot-suited *pachuco* as a cultural hybrid became a popular figure in Mexico during the war years and afterward. Called *tarzanes*—presumably after the movie image of Tarzan, whose long hair they copied—some young Mexican men dressed in pegged pants and drape jackets and spoke *pochismo,* Anglicized Spanish or "Gringo lingo," as a form of hip slang. The most famous of these was Germán Valdéz. Valdéz was raised in the border city of Ciudad Juárez and toured northern Mexico and the southwestern United States as a performer in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1943, he turned himself from a little known actor and singer into a national sensation when he created the comic character Tin Tan. Valdéz celebrated the border-crossing, code-switching, fashion-conscious *pachuco* by further exaggerating his theatrical style; he had been influenced by Cab Calloway's larger-than-life image as well as the growing notoriety of Mexican American youth after the zoot suit riot. Tin Tan appeared in a purple velvet zoot suit, hat with a long feather, a long watch chain, and ballooning trousers pegged at the ankles; according to *Time* magazine, his performances mixed "crazy versions of mariachi tunes, Russian melodies, Italian arias[,] but mostly he just spouts pocho like so much fast doubletalk." Despite condemnations from Mexican nationalist elites, who abhorred the invasion of U.S. popular culture, Tin Tan drew enthusiastic crowds and became a major radio and film star.[5]

To the north, some Canadian youth discovered the drape shape in news reports, in popular magazines and films, and from visitors and their own travels. As in Mexico, the Los Angeles riot had the effect of promoting the extreme style even as it provoked condemnations from Canadian officials. In Montreal, many believed zoot suiters to be Francophones who adopted the outfits to reinforce their sense of cultural difference. However, English-speaking youths, often of working-class

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Figure 26. Germán Valdéz as the Mexican *pachuco* "Tin Tan," in a publicity shot by Simón Flechine, known as Semo.

©(329514). CONACULTA. INAH-SINAFO-FN-Mexico.

background and Italian or Jewish descent, also wore the style in Montreal and other Canadian cities. Similar to zoot suiters in the United States, these Canadian youths were typically identified as extraordinary dancers or as members of gangs or cliques who frequented local cafes, dance halls, and other nightspots. Whatever their backgrounds, they were viewed as outsiders who had not embraced the wartime call for social cohesion and sacrifice. In the summer of 1944, zoot suiters and Canadian servicemen clashed in Montreal and Vancouver, following the pattern of the Los Angeles riot. In the dance halls of Verdun, a suburb of Montreal, sailors "politely ordered" young women and men wearing conventional clothes to leave, and then proceeded to battle and undress those in zoot suits. Their fashion assessments were not always right, as one journalist reported: many patrons "wearing pre-war suits, pre-W.P.T.B. [Wartime Prices and Trade Board]-regulated suits, were mistaken for zooters and set upon by the mob." Montreal's chief counselor, A. E. Goyette, called zoot suiters "*fifis*"—"pansies"—"who were exempted from the army or who weren't called up." Confounding country and manhood, they raised the ire of those in the armed forces.[6]

A particularly interesting case of the zoot suit's diffusion and local significance occurred in Trinidad. In 1941, the British government gave the United States permission to build an extensive military base on its colony. The American occupation, as it came to be known, not only offered high-paying jobs but also introduced American-style consumption and leisure to Trinidadians, who had long endured rural poverty and colonial dependency. White civilian contractors and black soldiers likely brought the zoot suit to Trinidad, explains historian Harvey Neptune. Screenings of the film *Stormy Weather* (1943), with its zoot-suited musicians and dancers, spread its image across the island. Young men known as "saga boys"—perhaps so named as a corruption of "swagger"—quickly embraced the zoot suit and made it part of their way of life in the war years. Some were simply followers of fashion, but others were gamblers or members of small gangs. In either case, Neptune explains, the zoot suit conveyed a new sense of social and economic independence: Saga boys used the extreme American style as a way to

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repudiate the British authorities' demands on male colonial subjects for "humility, discipline, and respectability." Other Caribbean islands were used as bases for training U.S. and British forces, which may explain why some Bahamian migrants were already wearing zoot suits when they arrived in the United States to work. Afro-Cubans also wore the style, and were teased as urban dandies; José Portuondo's 1944 poem, "Zoot-Suit Fruit," pokes fun at one fashion plate's "two-tone shoe" and "bright new suit / all speckle' and blue."[7]

By following the zoot suit in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean, we can see how this fashion spread along several distinct relays of transmission. Certainly American popular music and film contributed heavily to the promotion of the zoot suit in the Western hemisphere. But just as significant were the many interpersonal encounters that enabled men to see the fashion firsthand. Longstanding patterns of regional migration between Mexico and the southwestern United States facilitated the rapid movement of the *pachuco* style on both sides of the border; zoot suits found their way into Canada, Trinidad, and the Bahamas in large part because of the presence of U.S. Americans, especially the personnel involved in the war effort. In Canada and Mexico, news reporting on the Los Angeles riot carried additional weight, linking extreme clothing with the social tensions and politics of the war; as was the case in the United States, this coverage also exposed many to the style.

In other places, images from American mass media, not face-to-face encounters, spread the zoot suit. Black South Africans absorbed American fashions through motion pictures, including those featuring all-black casts. In the early 1940s, theaters in Johannesburg and other urban centers not only showed American gangster movies and film noir but also featured such films as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). These became highly popular with black audiences and offered a powerful example for South African youth, who picked up the sense of buoyancy, danger, and sophistication in this suit of clothes. Recent urban migrants and dandified men known as "clevers" had already begun to develop a new male stylishness as early as the 1930s; they sometimes formed youth gangs that were seen as a source of criminal activity and

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social tension. In the mid-1940s, a growing number of black South African city-dwellers began to imitate the specific look of the zoot suiters and gangsters who appeared on the screen.[8]

Wearing long American-style jackets, bright shirts, narrow-bottomed trousers, and snap-brim hats, these men became known as *tsotsis.* The term may have derived from "zoot" or from "ho tsotsa" ("to sharpen"), referring either to the narrowing of trousers or generally to looking sharp. Bearing a resemblance to Harlem's sharpies and zoot suiters, *tsotsis* spoke their own slang, hung out on street corners, and sometimes engaged in petty crime and gang activity. Typically, *tsotsis* or their families had migrated from rural areas only to experience a constricted job market and harsh racial segregation. Still, they had become acclimated to urban life and commercialized leisure, including dance halls, movie theaters, and "shebeens," illegal bars that sometimes took the names of popular films, including *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Cabin in the Sky*. *Tsotsis*' stylishness newly declared their allegiance to an identity as urban, streetwise youths, now distanced far from the "well-mannered, well-brought up God fearing country kid." It also marked a sense of separation and difference from their parents' authority and traditions. Strikingly, historian Clive Glaser observes, "parents still expected their teenage sons to wear shorts in the 1940s," making the long stove-pipe trousers an added affront. This sense of a generational identity marked by historic breaks with tradition was articulated in part through American mythology and styles. As Stanley Motjuwadi, a writer who followed this phenomenon, wrote, "Anything American was something to imitate." This America was Hollywood's version, and the imitation a fusion inspired by white, vaguely ethnic gangsters and dazzling African American performers.[9]

Controversies over *tsotsis* erupted in print as early as the mid-1940s. The *Bantu World*, a Johannesburg newspaper for the black middle class, ran numerous letters from readers about these young men and their style. A number scorned the "budding 'men of tomorrow'" as criminals, ne'er-do-wells, and moral failures. Others emphasized the need to

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improve education, provide job opportunities, and end the pass laws to make the figure of the *tsotsi* less appealing. At the same time, Glaser notes, the observations of readers pointed to a distinctive group experience and culture, marked by men's extreme clothing, gang affiliation, female companionship, and the pursuit of pleasure. W. N. Nzima noted how fashion had taken hold more generally among black urban youth: it was not only criminals but also most students who wore *tsotsi* pants or "bottoms," as they were sometimes called. Walter M. B. Nhiapo warned not to make too much of the symbolism of fashion. "It is a fallacy that certain clothes signify corruption or degradation of the spirit," he observed. "Their clothing is not worse than that of other people, nor is it a symbol of the real man. And their dressing . . . is but a barometer of the tastes, not their innerselves [*sic*]." These moderate views did not prevail: By the early 1950s, "tsotsiism" had come to be seen as a political threat and an intractable social problem.[10]

Variations of the zoot suit also became assimilated into the lives of youths in Europe during and after the war. Many had already become attuned to American popular culture in the interwar years. American jazz musicians and entertainers, including many African Americans, went on European tours right up to the eve of World War II, popularizing contemporary American styles. Local performers quickly imitated their music, clothing, dance steps, and gestures, offering cabaret acts and musical reviews with such themes as "Miss America" or "Tarzan." By the mid-1930s, a "jazz youth subculture," as historian Anton Tantner calls it, appeared all over Europe. Like their American counterparts, these young people loved swing music and dance, congregated in nightspots and on the streets, and gathered in homes to listen to jazz records. The brisk export trade in Hollywood films also broadcast the "American drape" and exaggerated features of the late 1930s—in gangsters' double-breasted suits, long frock coats in Westerns and Civil War dramas, and the urbane male style of romantic comedies. Few of these highlighted zoot suits, but such films as *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), highly popular abroad, influenced young

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men's attire even as they nourished a fantasy of America as a land of cowboys and mobsters.[11]

As their nations prepared for war, German "swing boys," Czech "*potápki*," Austrian "*schlurfs*," and French "*zazous*" all embraced extreme styles. Although the details of their clothing varied, these young men tended to wear long, draped jackets, colorful ties, and long hair. Some wore wide trousers, others narrow drainpipe pants. They did not slavishly imitate an American look: In Hamburg, a commercial port oriented to the North Atlantic, swing boys were drawn as much to British haberdashery as to American styles, wearing tailored suits, trench coats, and silk scarves, and carrying umbrellas. Influenced by the newsreels of 1938, which repeatedly portrayed Neville Chamberlain during the Sudetenland crisis, they gestured to the ideal of the English gentleman at the moment of English appeasement. In France, singer Johnny Hess made the song "Je Suis Swing" a popular hit in 1939, and its chorus—"zazou, zazou"—is credited with inspiring the eponymous Parisian youth fad. As described by the journal *L'Oeuvre,* the *zazou* dressed in a "soft, tiny brown hat, striped shirt collar . . . gaudy tie with an ultra tight knot . . . long jacket covering most of the buttocks, trousers short, narrow at the bottom and loose at the knees, quite high turn-ups [cuffs], white socks, suede shoes with quadruple soles." Even in the midst of the war, according to historian Rodger Potocki, the "Polish underground press reported on Warsaw youths who sported 'long, loose suit-jackets, hanging almost to the knees . . . [and] tight trousers.'"[12]

Few Americans abroad during the war years actually wore zoot suits and most, of course, were in uniform. In England, U.S. civilians and off-duty soldiers were more likely to wear moderate "American drapes," but even those styles sparked criticism. Subjected to strict textile limitations and "utility" clothes for the duration, British civilians viewed American menswear as oversized, loose, and gaudy, somewhat like the Yanks themselves. The zoot suit arrived in England worn by African American and West Indian seamen on supply ships that docked at British ports. The extreme American style made a vivid impression on some: "Zoot suits

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are all reet, old chap,'' wrote the black activist and intellectual George Padmore, who served as a war correspondent from London for African American newspapers in 1943. The American look particularly attracted young working-class men, although military mobilization and rationing made it tricky for them to adopt the style until after the war.[13]

American soldiers abroad also found occasions to poke fun at the home-front style, which might have been seen by locals. In Italy, for example, GIs staged a variety show with a ''snappy-suited Italian all dolled up'' in a zoot suit. Postwar references to the zoot suit in Italy, in such films as *Peccato Che Sia Una Canaglia* (''Too Bad She's Bad''), Alessandro Blasetti's 1954 screwball tale of thieves, suggest that the fashion had become a familiar one, associated with American hustlers and black-market traders.[14]

American government and private relief programs may have spread the style as well. Roosevelt's Lend-Lease policy, initially a maneuver to supply war materiel to those fighting the Axis, contained shipments of consumer goods, including clothing. The British Board of Trade claimed that ''large stocks of Zoot suits left on the hands of American manufacturers since Pearl Harbor'' had been dispatched to England and remade into clothing for children who had endured the Blitz, thus turning an unpatriotic style into victory clothes. Whatever the truth of this story, quantities of men's wool overcoats, suits, and pants were sent to the Allies. Although there is no clear evidence that extreme styles had been ''deported'' for violating the textile limitation orders, as the press account suggests, something akin to the zoot suit may have found its way to men in Great Britain and other countries through these shipments. For Polish intellectual Aleksander Wat, Lend-Lease offered ''countless trainloads of gifts,'' including men's clothing. Like many in eastern Poland after the 1939 Russian invasion, Wat had been forcibly resettled in Soviet Central Asia. Going to warehouses in Kazakhstan filled with Lend-Lease goods, he chose ''a wonderful suit, better than anything I'd had before, a beautiful tan material,'' and ''paraded around Alma-Ata in that wonderful suit.''[15]

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Whether seen in the movies, in cabarets, on the streets, or in relief packages, the drape of men's conventional suits from the late 1930s to the early 1940s combined with the occasional visibility of extreme fashion to create, in the minds of many, a sense of American style that could be adopted and adapted by youths around the world. The cut of a jacket, snap of a hat, and syncopated stroll were visible in different ways and rapidly refashioned by young people. As in the United States, generational experiences and social disparities shaped the meaning of such styles. As important were the distinct social and political circumstances young people encountered in the 1940s and early 1950s.

Even before war enveloped Europe, what started as a youthful expression of difference and as a marker of class and generational identity increasingly took on political overtones. "Swing boys" found ways around restrictions imposed by the Nazi authorities, who wanted to create a new German youth dedicated to work and the state. Despite official condemnation of the "degenerate" music of African Americans and Jews, the ban on American jazz was porous: jazz aficionados smuggled records across the border, renamed American songs to deceive censors, and tuned in distant radio stations abroad. Nazi newsreels and propaganda condemned American culture as materialistic and depraved but ironically publicized the very styles they denounced. At the same time, Joseph Goebbels's film policy allowed some American films to be shown in German theaters before the U.S. entrance into the war; young audiences copied the dance steps they saw in such films as *Broadway Melody of 1936* and *Born to Dance* (1936). The "swing youth" were from wealthier and professional class backgrounds and went further than other young people in their dislike of Nazi regimentation; for example they refused to join the Hitler Youth and counted on the social status of their parents to protect them. The Nazi regime increasingly found them an affront to their authority and moved to suppress them, which in turn led the swing youth to grow more political. By the early 1940s, Nazi authorities had rounded up and imprisoned swing boys and their female counterparts.[16]

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The *zazou* phenomenon similarly changed, as the *New York Times* reported in 1942, "from a seemingly innocent faddist movement into an openly Nazi-baiting organization." Some *zazous*, like those who had fled Paris for Cannes, denied they intended anything by their choice of style: "We have nothing to do with the war, nothing at all. We are the Zazous, the Zazous!" But their clothes, music, and attitudes were a rebuke to the message of moral regeneration and respectability articulated by the Vichy regime, and came to be seen as a protest against the war and German control. At first they simply continued to congregate in cabarets and gave quick improvisational performances, proclaiming themselves *zazous* in the metro. Like the German swing boys, the French *zazous* carried furled umbrellas as a witty jab against the Occupation authorities, a subtle symbol of their alignment with the Allies.[17]

As the occupation deepened, *zazous* moved to more overt opposition. When Jews in France were required to place a yellow Star of David on their clothing, some zazous began to wear yellow handkerchiefs in their breast pockets and even sewed Stars of David on their own clothes with "swing" printed in the middle. The official reaction to *zazous* was harsh, with scathing criticism from the press beginning in 1942 and violent efforts to suppress their outré fashion. Collaborationist groups chased *zazous* and cut their long hair. Such styles were a "victory of democratic besottedness and Jewish degeneracy," wrote one French collaborationist, "the product of twenty years of Anglo-Saxon snobbery on the part of the decadents." A growing number were arrested in bars and cafes and sent to German labor camps.[18]

Still, the idea of the *zazou* continued to percolate on the stage and in song. "There are *Zazous* in my neighborhood," Andrex (André Jaubert) sang in 1944. "I'm half there myself." His humorous song was sharply political, apparently attacking Nazi racism as it affirmed the unity of humankind—a unity based on free spirit:

So far on earth a man could be
White or black, or red, or yellow and that is all

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But another race is emerging
It's the *zazous*, it's the *zazous*.

By the end of the war, the zoot suit had become interwoven with notions of Americanness, a hybrid of Hollywood and Harlem, and the outsized presence of the wartime victor and liberator. As the Allies neared Paris in August 1944, a war correspondent for an African American newspaper exclaimed, "French youth in search of some appropriate expression of anticipated liberation has turned to the American Negro way of doing things by wearing zoot suits and jitterbugging."[19]

In countries devastated by loss, destruction, shortages, and political repression, many youths took up extreme clothing as an aesthetic to live by. These styles referenced an idealized America that oddly mingled GIs, gangsters, and sharpies as its quintessential representatives. At the same time, young European men added accoutrements and embellishments that diverged from the drape jackets and pegged pants that had made their fantastic appearance in Harlem, Los Angeles, and elsewhere in the United States. Differing from place to place, these styles were hybrids: They followed local fads for drainpipe pants or wide trouser legs, they ranged from highly tailored to loose and draped, and their trimmings varied, from painted ties to striped socks. These fashions, and their American inspiration, became a hallmark for young people in the midst of war and its aftermath, as they threaded their way through the social, economic, political, and familial wreckage of this time. As in the United States, such styles were also linked, in the minds of authorities and commentators, with a worldwide sense of youthful unrest, discontent, degeneracy, and delinquency.

After the war, many British working-class youths adopted the "American drape," seeing power, panache, and self-assertion in this foreign style. Among them were "spivs"—shiftless men who engaged in black marketeering and petty criminal activity. They wore oversized apparel more structured than the zoot suit, similar to the style of film gangsters, along with startling painted neckties. Also embracing extreme

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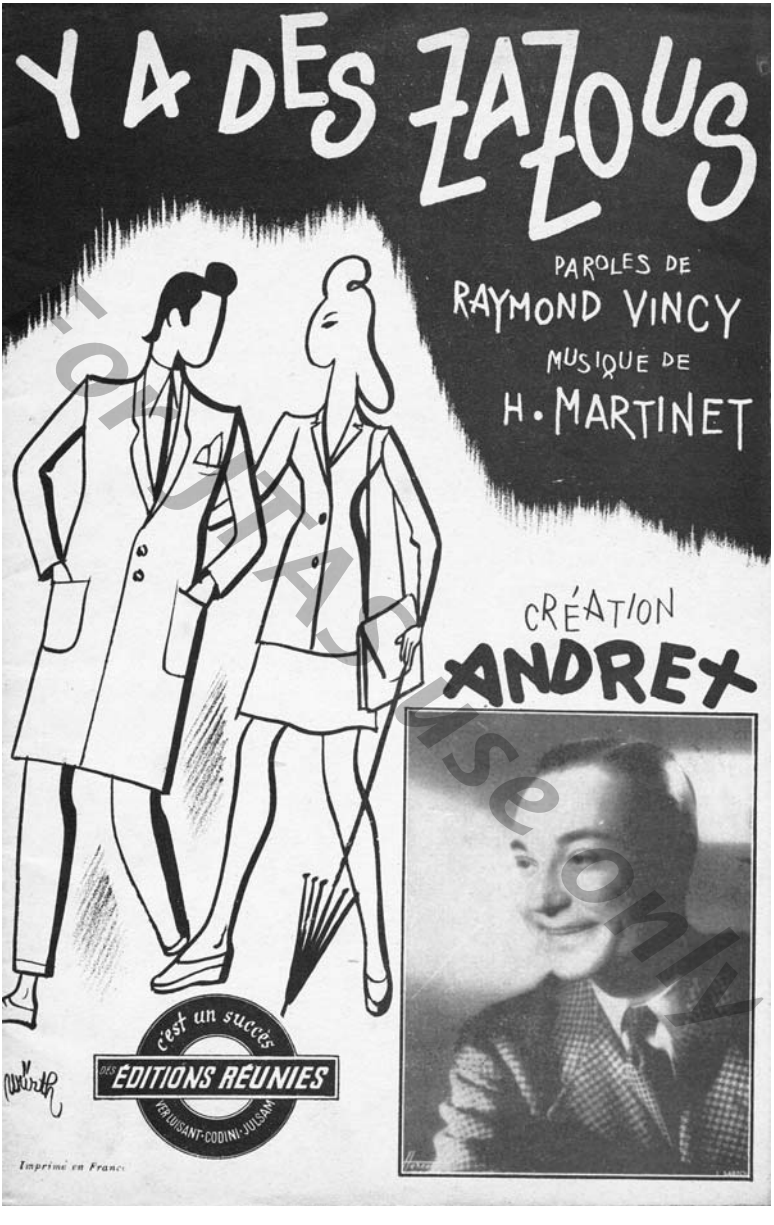


Figure 27. Andrex (André Jaubert) sang provocatively about *zazous* during the German occupation of France during World War II. *Y'a des Zazous* sheet music, 1943.

styles were the growing numbers of West Indian immigrants to England after the war. Social anxieties about the fate of postwar Britain—directed at American influence, the increasing presence of blacks, and upstart working-class youths—zeroed in on such clothing. Cartoons condemned spivs as antisocial figures, while Jamaican migrants were dismissed as "'Zootable' imports."[20]

Savile Row tailors made a conscious decision to challenge American styling in 1950 by reviving an Edwardian look for men, initially for the upper class. Much to everyone's surprise, marginalized working-class youths embraced a highly exaggerated, theatrical version of the Edwardian suit in the early 1950s. Known as "teddy boys," these men announced their public presence with a stylized parody of the social elites, wearing "curiously mixed costumes" made by plebeian tailors in South and East London. In their long coats with velvet collars, waistcoats, stovepipe trousers, and cowboy ties, American journalist Peter D. Whitney observed, "they have made a strange trans-Atlantic shotgun wedding of styles, grafting the fastidious Edwardian onto the flamboyant American zoot suit." Some were simply fashion-conscious youths, while others were members of criminal gangs.[21]

Although he did not address the hybrid style of the teddy boys, noted fashion historian James Laver perceptively discussed the differences in young men's style at this time, in a series of essays on "clothes and the welfare state." Laver read menswear as an expression of worldview, an aesthetic commentary on the past, present, and future. Unlike the "New Edwardians," whose clothes were a "discreet but definite protest against every aspect of modernity from motor-cars to income tax," young men who had embraced the postwar world "adopted American modes, the sinister hat of the Chicago gangster, the exaggerated shoulders of the would-be tough guy." These distinct styles reflected class differences as well as ideals of manliness; English tailoring "deliberately soft-pedal[ed] the note of masculinity," while American clothes emphasized it. At the same time, he observed that American inspiration took different paths among men in England. Laver contrasted the look of the "home-grown spiv" to that of the black Americans and West Indians he saw in England,

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whose draped American style—large sloping shoulders, very long and loose jackets, and legs that "seem to dwindle away into nothing"—facilitated a loose-limbed walk and magnetic presence. To Laver, their fashion awareness was profound. "If the top of the trousers sometimes shows in the opening of the coat that is not carelessness but *style,*" he marveled. "They have *been through* European clothes, and come out on the other side, into a world of freedom and fantasy."[22]

Through the 1950s, British youths would create an elaborate array of extreme styles associated with peer groups and gangs, and tied to distinctions of class, status, and race. As Steve Chibnall observes, however, an "embryonic teenage culture and style" appeared "five full years before its discovery by pressmen and academics in the Teddy Boy panic."[23] In the war's wake, this new sense of generation and identity would be irrevocably shaped by American clothing, music, and affect.

Given the important role and cultural influence of the United States in postwar England, the lingering hold of the zoot suit there may be understandable. More curious is the spread of this style among youth in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries after World War II. As Frederick Starr has shown, the wartime alliance with the United States opened the USSR to American films featuring swing music, new dance steps, and unusual clothing styles. The 1941 motion picture *Sun Valley Serenade*, with its lively version of "Chattanooga Choo Choo" by Glenn Miller's orchestra, Dorothy Dandridge, and the Nicholas Brothers, lifted spirits in wartime Russia; incongruously, Red Army bands played the song when their troops occupied Krakow and Warsaw. After the war, Soviet audiences could see "trophy films" removed from Germany; these were mostly German titles but included such American films as *The Roaring Twenties*. Strangely, as the Cold War quickly took hold and contemporary American cultural exports again were restricted, the American films that were available helped diffuse a prewar American male look in postwar Russia.[24]

In the months after the war, especially in Berlin, Soviet officials, military officers, and ordinary soldiers fraternized with their American counterparts, newly arrived journalists, and other visitors from the United

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States. They obtained copies of *Life* and *Time* magazines, traded for garments and jazz records on the black market, and received items of clothing as gifts from Westerners. Some of the *frontniki*—the revered veterans of the war—returned home with a new sense of style. As historian Mark Edele observes, they were "among the first men to stress clothes and outer appearance" in the Soviet Union. Too young to go to war, admiring adolescents eagerly imitated their looks.[25]

These young men were called *stiliagi*, translated into English as "style chasers" or "style hunters." The first public notice of the strange young men came in 1949, when D. Belyaev published a satirical piece in *Krokodil*, describing a young man at a student dance who "looked incredibly absurd: the back of his jacket was bright orange, while the sleeves and lapels were green; I hadn't seen such broad canary-green trousers since the days of the renowned bell-bottoms." Such self-conscious airs and stylishness rendered him effeminate to Belyaev, who remarked that "the most fashionable lady in Paris would have envied his perm and manicure." Retailing hipster's slang, jazz rhythms, and Western fashions, the *stiliagi* were ignorant of classic Russian music and dance. "The most important part of their style is not to resemble normal people," the satirist averred.[26]

This was not a zoot-suit imitator, *New York Times* Moscow correspondent Harrison Salisbury was quick to point out, but rather a style devotee with "a Russian personality of his own." According to Edele, *stiliagi* created "adaptations of adaptations, peculiarly Sovietized forms of originally Western models," an "alternative form of manliness" and self-fashioning that drew upon an imagined West. They ordered long drape jackets and narrow pants from tailors or even made these themselves. Cowboy shirts and loud ties, often painted with monkeys or cactuses—a detail seemingly inspired by Tarzan films and Westerns—accessorized their suits. They wore long hair in what was called the Tarzan fashion, used English phrases or their own invented slang, listened to prewar jazz records, danced "the atomic style, the Hamburg style, and Canadian style," and even walked an allegedly Western walk. "They do not seem to rock slightly from side to side as many

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Figure 28. A Soviet newspaper's caricature and denunciation of *stiliagi*.
New York Times, January 11, 1953.

Russian men . . . but pitch slightly forward," wrote one observer, and they gave the impression "that they can deal with any situation, that nothing would surprise them."[27]

Western fashions continued to percolate into the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and 1950s, but what seems to have been as important as their place of origin was the very concept of style itself. In a departure from the earlier aesthetic of socialist realism that had insisted on the "identity of art and life," art historian Susan Reid explains, "style began to acquire broad cultural importance in practice," apparent not only in the fine arts but also in a popular phenomenon like the *stiliagi*. The post-Stalin "thaw" of the mid-1950s, when Premier Nikita Khrushchev partially loosened state repression, released political prisoners, and permitted cultural exchange with the West, furthered the *stiliagi* phenomenon. "*Stiliaga* culture," writes Juliane Fürst, "floated on top of a general culture of pleasure-seeking." By this time, however, the fashions had begun to change. Earlier, *stiliagi* frequented large hotels in Moscow and Leningrad to scrutinize foreign visitors' looks, but after the mid-1950s, International Youth Festivals and the presence of American students brought new Western styles to the attention of young Russians, including blue jeans and rock and roll.[28]

The *stiliagi* were a puzzling challenge to Soviet officials. Although neither political dissenters nor common criminals, they deviated from the ideal of Socialist youth. "Pioneers of the unofficial culture," historian James von Geldern calls them: They preferred the pleasures of nightlife, sensuality, and costume to sanctioned youth activity, but their apparently apolitical hedonism was nevertheless construed as a challenge to the state. *Stiliagi* came from different backgrounds, and included many working-class men. Prominent among them, however, were the "gilded youth," the children of Party leaders and middle-class bureaucrats, who had access to education, leisure, consumer goods, and a degree of protection accorded by their parents' rank.[29]

The primary strategy for dealing with *stiliagi*, then, was public ridicule and denunciation. The Communist Party launched a campaign to

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promote proper lifestyles and guidance for Soviet youth in 1953; historian Miriam Dobson argues that they did so as a way to deflect attention from the rising crime rate that had resulted from Khrushchev's large-scale release of prisoners from the gulags. This had the effect of highlighting the activities of non-criminal *stiliagi.* The newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* repeatedly chided the fashion-seeker as an unsightly and amoral individualist, someone out of the American Wild West: "He dresses in a loud fashion. He has a lush hair-do. His stride is 'unscrewed.' In public places he conducts himself impertinently, trying to show himself a 'desperado' who doesn't give a damn about anything." They also attacked "girl *stiliagi*" for wearing makeup, dressing provocatively, and styling their hair like foreign movie stars. Caricatures of *stiliagi* were a common feature of the satirical magazine *Krokodil*, and composer Lev Oshanin wrote a musical parody that became popular in Moscow in 1955. Although these efforts may have dissuaded some, they were just as likely to have the opposite effect; as Fürst observes, "Nowhere did one learn better how to dress as a *stiliaga* than in the post-Stalinist press." Public mockery was backed by the more threatening approach of the Communist Youth League, whose members denounced *stiliagi,* reported them to teachers or work supervisors, and at times resorted to violence. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported that "league patrols had been nabbing youths in extreme attire, cutting off their long hair and ripping off their cowboy shirts," and it urged them to take less drastic measures. Still, there was an ongoing debate about whether *stiliagi* should be lumped together with more serious forms of youth misbehavior.[30]

Eastern European countries all had their own version of zoot-suited youth, from the Hungarian *jampec* to the Polish *bikiniarze* or "bikini boys." The identification of distinctive youth cultures was not new: the word *jampec* had been used as early as 1928 to label idle, foppish youths. It came to have a more specific meaning after World War II, describing young men who loved jazz and adopted extreme style—tight pants, checked jackets, loud ties, and shiny shoes with thick soles. Generally of working-class origin, *jampec* had been children during the war, and had

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developed survival skills and an attitude of independence. They bought jazz records and clothes on the black market; as one noted, "It was a big thing that you could buy it on the side." Their style and toughness became legendary. "In the fifties, if a young boy decided to enter the wild side, the *jampec* was at hand ready-made," sociologist Ferenc Hammer observes.[31]

As the neologism *bikiniarze* suggests, these postwar Polish youths had a specific persona that derived from their consumption of Western culture—or at least a culture they understood as Western. In Poland, despite the Communist takeover after the war, a governmental policy of moderation was maintained until 1948, which, according to historian Rodger Potocki, "made the *bikiniarze* possible." The American embassy circulated copies of *Time* and *Life*, Western "trophy films" appeared in movie theaters, and Poles could hear jazz at American-founded YMCAs and on the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Network. Most important in the immediate postwar period was the arrival of Western goods through the black market and humanitarian organizations like CARE, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and Polish-American aid societies. Secondhand clothing from abroad supplied 75 percent of Poles' clothing needs right after the war. Notes Potocki, "It became known as *ciuchy* [duds] and from it came the garb of the *bikiniarze*." Later, diplomats, visiting athletes and musicians, and merchant sailors brought foreign clothes into the country, even as the government tried to limit their availability by imposing high import duties and suppressing the black market. The "attire of a bygone era," worn out of necessity, played into notions of an imagined West and a nostalgia for the interwar period, the time of the second Polish republic, before the succession of fascist and Communist occupiers. Bikini boys punctuated their suited look with colorful socks and distinctive ties, sometimes pinning American cigarette labels onto them or painting them with bikini-clad women, atomic bombs, or palm trees. In 1955, however, when the Fifth World Youth Festival was held in Warsaw and young Poles witnessed firsthand the sea change in youth attire, they threw away their zoot suits.[32]

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What did these styles mean? If historians of the Soviet Union have differentiated style-chasers from political dissenters, the line is less clear in the case of Eastern Europe. In Poland, the bikini boys made their presence felt on the streets, in theaters, and in other public places. In contrast to the saboteurs and partisans engaging in hit-and-run attacks on Russian officials, journalist Thomas Harris observed in 1953, these were "the most subtle resisters"; they "burlesque Communist propaganda against the United States" by dressing in zoot suits, red socks, and painted ties. Leopold Tyrmand, an anti-regime writer and editor, embraced the look of the *bikiniarze*, especially the socks. Agnieszka Oziecka, who wrote a song about the phenomenon in the mid-1950s, recalled that for Tyrmand "the red or striped socks . . . were not only socks. They were a challenge and an appeal, they were a charter of human rights. These socks spoke for the right to be different, or even to be silly." Tyrmand called it "the right to one's own taste." Similarly in Yugoslavia, clothing inspired by Western styles took on political meanings. In his memoir, Serbian writer Borislav Pekić described the long, broad-shouldered jackets and narrow pants worn by his generation. They frequented the American Reading Room in Belgrade for its books and recordings, only to be beaten up by thuggish members of SKOJ, the Union of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia, who patrolled the streets around the library.[33]

As in the Soviet Union, Communist officials in Eastern Europe in the 1950s faced the dilemma of trying to control the behavior of "gilded youth," the privileged children of Party officials, as well as young men among the working class who had picked up unconventional styles. They derided those who embraced Western-oriented clothing and culture, criticizing them as "hooligans," a category that included antisocial and criminal behavior. As Karl Brown has found, official Hungarian criticism of the *jampec* was extensive beginning in 1952. Communist Party newspapers called for a crackdown against youths who "portray the dismal picture of imitating the American gangster's misanthropic spirit, moral decay and spiritual degeneration." Such propaganda campaigns against

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Western fashion came at a time of serious food and clothing shortages. Budapest department stores created display windows that featured mannequins in zoot suits posed with apes and placards that stated, "We don't sell capitalistic fashions in this store." Feature films appeared with the *jampec* as a law-breaker, and some working-class dance halls banned zoot suits.[34]

State-run motion picture units in Poland made newsreels that mocked bikini boys' "decadent western fashions." The distinctive voice of actor Andrzej Lapicki narrated one such film whose title was, loosely translated, "the cameraman spied on you":

> It's nice to dress up as a bum, to block the entrance to the trolley and laugh at the conductor who asks you to buy a ticket. Let others bore themselves in schools and beat records in new construction. . . . Is there anything as beautiful as a tie with naked girls à la Hollywood? Low-tops with five-centimeter-thick white rubber soles, "Sing-Sing" socks [i.e. striped], are further attributes of men's fashion. Hats with rims as big as pancakes are proof of a subtle soul and sensitivity to beauty. *Bikiniarz*, *dzoler*, hooligan: the names differ but the type is the same! It is not enough to ignore them, you have to ridicule them and drive them away!

The accompanying film footage, with a sprightly jazz tune playing in the background, likely undercut this message. The newsreel showed cheerful workers from the Rosa Luxemburg factory engaged in calisthenics and sports, "propagating physical fitness among the workers" and "taking an active role in the fight to fulfill production plans."[35] But the bikini boys seemed to be the ones having the most fun, as the camera shot them traveling the city, enjoying street life, playing cards, dancing, and horsing around.

Authorities worried that these styles were the "secret weapon" of the West. Observed a Romanian government spokesman, "jitterbugging,

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boogie-woogie, Bikiniism . . . and hooliganism are features of the ethics of American imperialism designed to destroy the creative intelligence of our youth.'' Some noted, however, that the drab Soviet-style culture could not compete with the enticements of American entertainment. As a Budapest newspaper lamented, ''One cannot replace boogie-woogie by sour music.'' Still, the official attacks on these styles, linked to criticisms of the United States and the West, were less an example of overt repression than an effort to define and contour Communist culture, and to bring young people into its fold.[36]

The extreme style of the zoot suit, with its outré proportions and eccentricity, caught the imagination of young men around the world. This is remarkable, given its origins in Harlem among poor but fashion-conscious African American youth in the late 1930s. Hollywood helped spread the style, although not in any organized way. *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, which so influenced the attire of South African *tsotsis* and Trinidadian saga boys, were atypical films for 1943. Beyond such images, the style circulated outside the normal channels of distribution for consumer goods—glimpsed on American civilians, appearing on the black market, stuffed into relief packages. The spread of the zoot suit shows how rapidly and successfully a style could take hold when it seemed to embody the sense of generational identity and affiliation sharpened by the war and its aftermath. Yet wherever zoot suits appeared, controversy followed—among British administrators reasserting the colonial dependence of Trinidadians, Mexican intellectuals pondering authentic national identity, South African officials concerned about unruly urban black youth, or Communist leaders trying to advance anti-Western, anti-capitalist sentiments. These controversies often educated youths in the mysteries of fashion, but they also clarified what was at stake in embracing it. Thus the aesthetic of an extreme style that incorporated elements of Western clothing conveyed a range of meanings. For people like Tyrmand, a fashion statement could be consciously oppositional, if not in the explicit way of a speech or text. For others, its meaning was more subtle, a declaration of individuality, modishness, and peer

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group identity, set against family expectations, a drab environment, poverty, and the requirements imposed on everyday life by authoritarian regimes. Into the mid-1950s, there were young men whose style retained the traces of the wartime zoot suit, referencing an America of the imagination, an aspect of their self-fashioning.

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