

“The effect of World War Two rationing on style and fashion”

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Historical Paper

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Many people think that during World War Two (WWII) food was the only item put under rations. However, fabric and other various types of materials were also rationed. By the end of 1942, The United States Office of Price Administration had already put rations onto multiple items, including sugar, cars, and gasoline¹. One of the most heavily rationed items were fabric and clothing. Rations during WWII affected the fashion and style of clothing by limiting the amount of fabric available and the inventions of new fabrics. The rations changed fashion because they limited the amount of fabric one could use and through the social acceptance of wearing less clothing.

In Great Britain, clothing were under much heavier rations then in the United States. There, ration booklets were given out to each person. They contained a set number of clothing coupons for use throughout the year. For example a women's skirt would cost seven coupons, and a girl's skirt would cost five coupons. Children under eighteen were given ten extra coupons in case they grew during the year². There were also austerity rules issued about how much fabric could be used to make a garment or how many pockets, ruffles, etc. However, in the United States, certain fabrics such as silk and nylon were rationed or simply not sold³. The US government also pushed a "make do and mend" mentality onto their citizens. This means that it was encouraged to not buy new clothes but to fix and maintain the old clothes. Many posters were put up around cities reminding people to not only save food, but to also save fabric.

Instead of rationing the amount of clothing one could buy, the US government rationed fabric. One example was nylon. Nylon was used to make parachutes and so it was heavily

¹ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/united-states-and-canada/us-history/office-price-administration>

² <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/8-facts-about-clothes-rationing-in-britain-during-the-second-world-war>

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<https://www.thevintagenews.com/2016/12/25/fashion-on-the-ration-how-wwii-and-the-rationing-of-clothes-affected-fashion-and-street-style/>

rationed. However, it was also used to make women's stockings, which were seen as a daily staple for women. The low supply of nylon caused a high demand for them amongst women. Wherever nylons were sold, there was sure to be a stampede of women. Although it's not a fabric, rubber was not even sold because of the need for tires and other necessary military items. Before the war, rubber was used to make girdles for women, and as a result of rubber not being sold during the war, women stopped wearing them and they have not come back in the years following the war.

The British government introduced Utility Clothing or Civilian Clothing 1941 (CC41) in 1941. These clothes were all made with minimal amounts of fabric.⁴ This Civilian Clothing Order made it illegal to spend extra time "embellishing" clothing.

Before the war, Paris was considered the "capital" of the fashion world. Most of the haute couture designers were in Paris.⁵ However, when it became under Nazi occupation, on June 14, 1940, it was seen as "unpatriotic" to buy clothes from Paris. Because the world needed a new fashion capital, it got turned over to New York City. Even now, almost eighty years later, New York City is still the fashion capital of the world.

Some fabrics were invented as a response to limited supplies of other fabrics. Many new synthetic fabrics and materials were made. Synthetic means that it's made of man made fibers instead of natural.⁶ One example of a synthetic material made during the war was polyester. Polyester is used to make faux silk, leather, and satin. Many swimsuits now are made partially

⁴ [http://www.fashion-era.com/utility_clothing.htm#1942 British Civilian Clothing Order CC41](http://www.fashion-era.com/utility_clothing.htm#1942%20British%20Civilian%20Clothing%20Order%20CC41)

⁵ <https://bellatory.com/fashion-industry/Fashion-History-Design-Trends-of-the-1040s>

⁶ <https://www.barnhardtcotton.net/blog/know-fibers-cotton-vs-synthetic-fibers/>

from polyester. Although rayon was invented in 1885, it was used as a substitute for silk during the war.

One response to the war was to knit. Knitting for the soldiers became popular during World War One and so many people took it up again during the war years. Usually thought of as a female task, women were not the only ones knitting. Everyone was knitting when they had spare time. Everyone from child care workers to bus drivers, whenever they had free time they would fervently knit items to send overseas. The most common items knitted for soldiers were socks, gloves, hats, and sweaters.⁷ One propaganda poster encouraging knitting said, “Remember Pearl Harbor, Purl Harder,⁸” Purling is a type of technique in knitting, and it is used commonly amongst beginners.

Due to the war and the loss of many fabrics, new styles of clothing came into popularity. One very common item that found its start during WWII was the bikini. Named after Bikini Atoll, a remote nuclear bomb testing site in the Pacific⁹, the modern bikini was created by a French designer by the name of Louis Reard¹⁰. When the bikini first hit the shelves, it was immediately popular amongst Mediterranean women. It took a bit longer for Americans to get used to such a small suit, but once they did the suit has not gone out of style. Beth Duncuff Charleston, of the costume institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, says that “the bikini represents a social leap involving body consciousness, moral concerns, and sexual attitudes.” This style of swimsuit used far less fabric than its more modest counterparts, which goes along

⁷ <http://elinorflorence.com/blog/wartime-knitting>

⁸ <http://www.historylink.org/File/5722>

⁹ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/biki/hd_biki.htm

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<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/the-bikinis-inventor-guessed-how-much-it-would-horrify-the-public-6914887/>

with the “make do with less” mentality during the war. “The US government also ordered that fabric in womens swimsuits had to be reduced by ten percent.”¹¹ Another example of a new style is that pantsuits and clothing with bulkier shoulders became popular because they looked more like a military uniform. Pants also became popular among women who replaced men working in industrial jobs. For these women, working in pants were much more comfortable and safe amongst the heavy machinery because skirts could easily get caught in machinery.

Shoes also underwent a major change during the war. In the 1920s and 30s, shoes with high heels were in style. However, during the war when many women replaced men in their jobs with heavy machinery, their shoes had to change.¹² Shoe manufacturers started to make shoes that had shorter heels and had closed toes. T-straps and open toed shoes both saved on leather and looked nice. Many women also began to wear loafers to protect their feet while they were working in factories.

One of the few items free of rationing were hats. Many of the materials hats were made of were not rationed.¹³ While people had to wear the same few outfits due to rationing and the “make do and mend” mentality, hats were an easy accessory that could “spice” up the look. Hats during the war were oftentimes very colourful and had many details on them. This was a contrast to most dresses which were, because of the rations, usually were one solid color and were very simple in style. In 1943, Grace Margaret Morton, an author during the war wrote “So when the

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<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1062&context=constructing&seid=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.google.com%252Furl%253Fq%253Dhttps%253A%252F%252Fdigitalcommons.iwu.edu%252Fcgi%252Fviewcontent.cgi%253Farticle%25253D1062%252526context%25253Dconstructing%2526sa%253DD%2526ust%253D1515453761699000%2526usg%253DAFQjCNFbBU49XrxCMNaGhskRC30Sze-N0A#search=%22https%3A%2F%2Fdigitalcommons.iwu.edu%2Fcg%2Fviewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D1062%26context%3Dconstructing%22>

¹² <https://bellatory.com/fashion-industry/Fashion-History-Design-Trends-of-the-1040s>

¹³ <https://thriftyvintagechic.com/2011/06/08/why-hats-kept-fashionistas-sane-in-wwii/>

mood of today's hats seem frivolous it may be a kind of singing in the dark, the expression of an effort to put a bit of gaiety into a world burdened with problems," One other style of hat that was extremely popular during the war were the turban style hats. Most women had no spare time to get their hair done because of the work they picked up so a turban was an easy way to wrap the hair and keep it up and away¹⁴. Hair was usually kept long so it was easier to tie back for work. A snood was similar to a turban, although it didn't wrap around the head, it was attached with pins¹⁵. Both of these hat were beneficial especially to working women as they kept hair up and out of the face while simultaneously looking good. They were also helpful as about five million women entered the workforce during World War Two¹⁶ and they needed a fashion that was easy and safe for the workplace.

Another concept that came from the war that is still in use today is glow in the dark items. These were created as a result of blackouts in Great Britain¹⁷. The blackouts were to make the cities harder to see for the German bombers. The government encouraged people to wear white and glow in the dark buttons as a precaution. During the blackouts people turned their lights off and drew their blackout curtains, headlights of cars were covered and street lights were turned off. The invention of glow in the dark items still remains important to this day as many items are glow in the dark.

By the end of the war in 1945, rations on clothing in Great Britain and certain fabrics in the United States had a large effect on fashion. By limiting one fabric, another material was

¹⁴ <https://condenaststore.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/world-war-2-hats/>

¹⁵ <http://www.thatwayhat.com/store/millinery-hat/vintage-archive-e20>

¹⁶

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-us-history/period-7/apush-us-wwii/a/american-women-and-world-war-ii>

¹⁷ <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-clothes-rationing-affected-fashion-in-the-second-world-war>

created and both of the government's encouragement to reuse old clothing led to new and simpler styles during the war. Rationing during World War Two had a major impact on fashion because the limited fabric and clothing helped shape new styles. We can still see these styles even today, almost eighty years later, in the bikini, the continued use of polyester in clothing, and glow in the dark items.

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“Process Paper”

I chose my topic because I learned about rationing last year and I thought it was interesting.

There’s also a lot of research on this topic. I conducted my research by using google scholar and

by looking for reputable seeming sites. I decided to write a paper because I'm most familiar and comfortable with writing them.