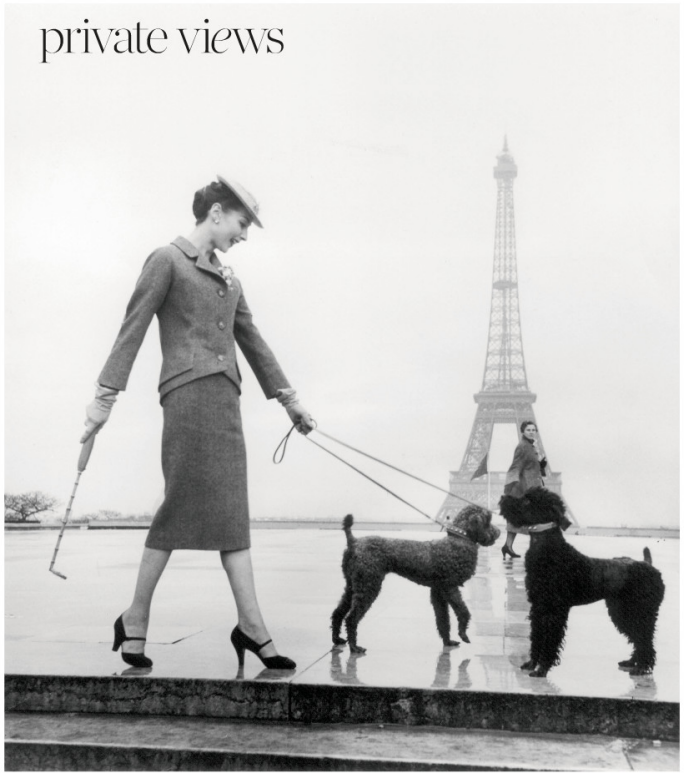


BOOKS

style WARS

When the Germans invaded Paris in 1940, fashion almost became a patriotic duty. Historian and author **ANNE SEBBA** explains how the women of occupied France used their sense of style as a silent protest against the Nazis

One of the most haunting images of French women at the end of World War II shows them ashamed and humiliated, often semi-naked, as they were paraded through villages by the Allies, their heads shaven and sometimes a Swastika tattooed on their foreheads. They had been judged guilty without trial for *collaboration horizontale* – sleeping with German soldiers – and were now being punished.

But there is another side to the story of how the women of France behaved after 1940 when their country was invaded and occupied by the Nazis. It's a story I discovered while researching my book on women in wartime Paris – that fashion was one of the unexpected ways women chose not only to resist the German enemy, but also to assert a woman's power in a country that denied them the right to vote and prohibited them from taking jobs without the consent of a husband.

For the women of Paris, remaining fashionable was considered far from trivial during the war. It was a matter of personal and national pride to dress in as beautiful and outrageous a way as possible. For many, this was the best revenge they could exert on their German occupiers. The writer Colette, who remained in the city throughout the war, observed the ridiculous concoctions of flowers, ribbons and upside-down birds that young women were wearing on their heads, concluding that they were driven by 'the terrible rage to live'.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, when it was thought that the Germans would be swiftly repelled and the French victorious, several magazines called on their women readers to keep up standards for the men's sake. In a striking red lipstick advertisement, Helena Rubinstein insisted it was the duty of all women to communicate to their loved ones the optimism that results from confidence in oneself. "For those who are fighting, you must stay how they would like to see you," declared the popular fashion monthly *Le Jardin Des Modes* on its September 1939 cover. "The men want to think of you looking how you did when they said goodbye, pretty and soignée." It was a stirring column, telling women they also had power to accomplish another essential task: not to allow haute couture and its associated industries, one of the vital resources of Paris, to die. The livelihoods of 20,000 women were at stake.

While they still had stocks of fabrics, most couture houses including Molyneux, Schiaparelli, Jean Patou and Paquin, decided they would show their collections "to help French women remain dignified in their struggles". These collections were as glamorous as ever, the only concessions to war being the introduction of some military design elements such as frogging, shoulder braid and tassels on overcoats. And when gas masks were declared a necessity, these Parisiennes, determined not to forsake fashion, bought specially adapted handbags, either cylindrical or with a section at the bottom to hold the masks, such as those invented by Jeanne Lanvin.

Photography Bob Landry/Picture Post/Getty Images; Mike Kagan/Refna; © Louise Dahl-Wolfe / Courtesy Staley-Wise Gallery, New York

As the Germans requisitioned key materials and imports of wool and cotton were blocked, the couture houses had to obey strict quotas and, although they still produced items for high society, film stars and German wives, most French women, determined not to yield in the face of adversity, had to become more imaginative. Those magazines that continued, even with limited paper supplies, became increasingly popular and gave advice on how to adapt existing items, including patterns for dresses made of several different fabrics, not intrinsically beautiful but fashionable by force of circumstance. Shoes were now made of cork or wood and resourceful women would spend hours covering them with scraps of fabric trying to make them more elegant.

Throughout the war, finding silk stockings other than those on the black market costing 10 times the price of a pre-war pair, caused particular difficulties since it was considered distinctly unladylike to be seen without stockings in France; yet wearing trousers was deemed insufficiently feminine, and was, in theory, banned according to a law dating from 1800 reinforced by Vichy. The Vichy regime urged women to seek fulfilment from being mothers and homemakers and in propaganda even accused women of having neglected their pre-war duty through coquetry and egoism. Elizabeth Arden had the answer: a miracle bottle of iodine dye sold in three shades – flesh, gilded flesh and tanned flesh, marketed as "the silk on your legs without silk stockings". Stockings were such a prized item that Jeannie Rousseau, a spy hoping to escape to England to tell Churchill about the Germans' rocket-making program, carried two dozen pairs with her as an alibi, claiming she was hoping to sell them on the black market in Brittany. She was arrested nonetheless and deported to the brutal, all-women camp at Ravensbrück.

For most women in wartime France, elegance was paramount. Even if they did occasionally wear ridiculous concoctions upon their heads, they refused to give in to the everyday pressures of war, as Elsa Schiaparelli commented: "The hideous headgear, tormenting, heavy and unbecoming, all denoted a Paris convulsed and trampled on but still possessed of a sense of humor, and in order to defend its real inner self intent on putting up a front that purposely skimmed the edge of ridicule."

Les Parisiennes: How the Women of Paris Lived, Loved and Died in the 1940s by Anne Sebba (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, $29)

"Remaining *fashionable* was considered far from trivial during the war"



MILITARY MODE An American soldier talks to a French model on the streets of newly liberated Paris in 1944



Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks in 1978

***Silver Springs* by Fleetwood Mac**

Everything Stevie Nicks does is gold, but this song in particular has so much emotion behind it.

***Metamorphosis* by Martin Jacoby**

I play this when I'm relaxing and reading in the bath. It's great for unwinding to, especially if I don't feel like listening to anything too lyrical.

***Red Eyes* by The War on Drugs**

I seem to listen to this on planes a lot. Kurt Vile quasi screams at one point, on beat, and it makes you feel like you could be at one of their concerts.

***Waitin'* by Caitlin Rose**

My goodness, does she have a voice. When does she take a breath?



PORTER playlist...

JULIA STILES

The American actress, who first won hearts in the 1999 romantic comedy 10 Things I Hate About You and this summer stars in the latest Bourne film, reveals the songs that inspire her

***River* by Ibeyi**

These sisters channel the music of Afro-Cuban spirituals and it's magical. There's something about the rhythm that to me is really soothing.

***Lazy Projector* by Andrew Bird**

Every song on his album *Break It Yourself* is fantastic. Sometimes I sing these songs to myself when I am nervous. *"It's all in the hands of a lazy projector"* is a lyric that really puts things in perspective.

***This Must Be The Place* by Talking Heads**

My mom used to listen to this album when she cleaned the house on Sundays. It makes me happy.

***Ragged Dawn* by Leisure Cruise**

This was featured in a play I did so I listened to it every night for months and find it never gets old. It should be used as a film score.



Jazz legend Louis Armstrong in 1967

***Ain't Misbehavin'* by Louis Armstrong**

The trumpet solo in the middle of this song is inspired.