

# High cost of Kremlin chic

In the fine art of Kremlin watching, small details often presage important changes. So everyone is straining to find clues that will tell us what the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, will do.

While experts have been fussing about nuclear weapons, economics and geopolitics, this column's intelligence department has, I believe, made the most important discovery to date: Mrs. Raisa Gorbachev's wardrobe.

Wives of past Soviet leaders like Mrs. Nina Khrushchev or Mrs. Viktoria Brezhnev used to feature the Gorky look: Round, squat, and dumpy, draped in what appeared to be calico oilcloth. These poor women were the subject of much derision in the decadent bourgeois West.

Enter Raisa Gorbachev, likely the first wife of a Soviet leader who did not learn to dress in a collective farm or boiler works. A full generation younger than her predecessors, the new Soviet first lady represents the class of *nomenclatura* — the party elite.

This privileged group of party functionaries and their families goes to special schools, socializes together, travels to the West and, most important in the Soviet Union, has access to Western clothing and bourgeois luxuries. Go to the right places in Moscow and you can find everything from Halston to Duran Duran.

Last December, Gorbachev made a high-profile trip to Britain. Along came Raisa; instead of the usual squat Muscovette, the media were thrilled to see an attractive, well-dressed, even stylish woman at the side of the Soviet leader. The British media responded to her chic with about the same euphoria they would have greeted total nuclear disarmament.

What we saw there was, of course, the ardent desire by many Westerners to find clues, however faint, that the terrifying Soviets are really just like

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us. People who dress well don't start wars. Right? Just ask those natty Nazis.

Aside from these airy thoughts, Raisa Gorbachev may have a truly monumental effect upon the Soviet Union: Its 140 million women will suddenly realize that their early 1940 Komsomol styles are out. If they don't know it already, most will soon be painfully aware that they need a New Look.

On the surface, this may seem a trivial problem. But, as any husband knows who has heard those terrifying words, "I need a new look, Sheldon," this means big, big bucks. Imagine 140 million Soviet women turning to their husbands or fathers and saying, "I want to look just like Raisa!"

The Soviet Union's factories are busy turning out tanks and steel. There is no spare productive capacity to make hundreds of millions of new women's outfits. Imagine if just half of all Soviet women decided that they needed a new dress — with a slit because Raisa has one. The Five Year Plan simply did not take into account 70 million new frocks with slits — yet who will dare say no to enraged Soviet womanhood. These are a bunch of tough ladies.

And anyone who knows anything about women knows that they just do not go and buy one dress. Next comes that most feared of all words: Accessories. Matching belts, shoes, purses, hats, coats, gloves, scarves, blouses, watches, compacts, nylons, undies, umbrellas. They all have to match, and when one component goes out of fashion, you have to dump the rest — and buy more.

This is why the West cannot match the Soviet arms buildup. They have 55,000 tanks ready to roll westward; we have Montana and Fendi. But now that dumpy Kremlin wives will no longer set the fashion trend on the Volga, the Soviet economy is in for a whirlwind of female spending that may well change the nation's defence and foreign policy.

No more huge dams, no more of those beautiful, sexy T-72 tanks or MiG-31s. No more dishing out hard cash to the Ethiopians or lazy Cubans. Russia's women will rise up and say *nyet* to silly male spending. Money is to be spent on serious things. Like the Athenian women of yore, they will tell their homecoming husbands, "Vladimir, no blini, no vodka, no me until I see some new clothing. Svetlana next door just got a whole new wardrobe."

Until Raisa, the Soviet Union had managed to avoid the twin scourges of lamebrained feminism and women's fashions. Now, time may be fast running out for Soviet men. So much for the Five Year Plan; a real revolution in stodgy Russia may be about to begin.