A War Between the Pages:  
A Historic Look at the Influence of Vogue on Women During World War II  

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Introduction

In December, 1941 America joined its allied nations to fight in the Second World War. This period of time led to an exciting change in women’s clothing. While the war itself would leave a lasting impression on women’s fashion, its impact can be seen at more than just face value. Meghann Mason’s dissertation, *The impact of World War II on women's fashion in the United States and Britain* argues that fashion was directly impacted by rationing and government restrictions.\(^1\) While that is inherently true, the impact on fashion during the Second World War was not based solely on the rationing limitations imposed by the government. Fashion was also impacted by the patriotic fervor that ensued as a direct result of the war. Fashion magazines encouraged women to dress patriotically with pro-war sentiments through the duration of the US’s involvement in World War II. Vogue, in particular, encouraged women to express their patriotism by calling women to work and displaying fashions that adhered to government restrictions. This encouragement broke class barriers of respectability. The popular fashion magazine made joining the war effort itself stylish, and provided upper-class women with the fashion know-how to dress for it. Articles and editorials on clothes and lifestyle all portrayed these ideas of fashionable patriotism. However, throughout the course of the war, Vogue went from showing its patriotic efforts in every aspect of dress and lifestyle to separating fashion and the War. Articles acknowledged happenings of the Second World War but were not directly reflected in fashion editorials. In this research I explore the influence Vogue had on fashion as well as women throughout

the duration of World War II. Vogue’s articles and fashion editorials made it respectable and patriotic for upper-class women to enter the public sphere in working class roles.

For this research, I looked at issues of Vogue from 1942 through 1945. I sampled issues from January, July and September of those years, with a primary focus on the September issues. September, generally being the largest issue of many fashion magazines, I thought it would give the best look at changing fashions from year to year. I looked closely at January, 1942 because of its close proximity with the United States entrance into war with Germany and Japan. Through my research I found that Vogue encouraged women to express their patriotism by calling women to work and displaying fashions that adhered to government restrictions. Not only did Vogue call women to work, but they also gave them the know-how to dress for their new lives. The popular fashion magazine made joining the war effort in itself fashionable, and provided women who had considerable means with the courage to leave their homes and help in any way with the war effort. However, the magazine did not keep this up through the entire time the United States was involved with the war. Nearing the end of conflict Vogue focused its fashion reporting as separate from the war effort.

**Patriotic Dress and the Call to the War Effort**

Meghann Mason’s dissertation explores the major historical question of the impact that World War II had on women’s fashion. That paper focuses primarily on how government restrictions and rationing had the biggest impact on fashions of the time period. The thesis focuses on the limitations that War imposed on designers, beauty product manufacturers, and the fashion industry at large. Within these rationing aspects Mason included: changes in shoe styles due to restrictions on leather goods, the move to the use of man made materials such as plastics, nylon and rayon, as well as fashion changes in head-coverings due to rationing on hair products. Her article also explored what women did in response
to these limitations to remain fashionable. She uses magazines such as Vogue as one piece of her evidence.

“Maintaining beauty and allure were major wartime challenges faced by designers. American Vogue magazine’s first cover for January after the U.S. entry into the war spoke of the new life American women would have to face and how to look gorgeous while doing it.”

Vogue, as a primary source, takes an in-depth look at exactly what sort of impact the war had on fashion. It also inspired me to look at the magazine articles more closely and see exactly what sort of information on dress was disseminated to the public through the duration of the Second World War. I do agree with Mason’s argument that rationing greatly impacted women’s fashion during the Second World War. However, fashion was not solely changed by rationing alone. Vogue took the idea of patriotic duty and molded it into the latest trend.

Vogue Magazine released an article and editorial in January 1942, the month following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the US’s entrance into the Second World War, entitled Our Double Duty Lives: War Work + Home Work. The article described a woman's duty was to divide her life between supporting the war effort and her home life. It argued that women were the major component to total victory. The Article described the wearing of the uniform as something of the utmost importance. It was accompanied by a striking photograph with the double image of a woman in the looking glass wearing civilian attire with the same woman in a military style uniform standing directly behind her.

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2 Mason, “The impact of World War II on women's fashion in the United States and Britain.”
“To do this—as the women of Britain have done— to split our lives; to do war work and to run our houses and our children’s lives with same delight, but added need of treasuring life at home against war. And what ever our duties are, one symbol of our new double-duty lives is the uniform.”

The wearing of the uniform shown above is not only a call to adorn military dress but it is also a symbol of how women should behave now that the United States was fully engaged in World War II. Vogue was directly encouraging women to leave their homes to participate in the war effort through work. Not only were they encouraging women to work, but they also gave women the fashion advice in which to do so. The woman in the mirror is beautiful and fashionable, but her image is also patriotic in support of the war effort. This image made the idea of the military styles and movement to the workplace fashionable and it would have had a direct impact on women’s dress even at the early stages of the US involvement in the war. Following this article is an editorial on women’s suits. The suits are accompanied with a short description and on where these pieces would be most useful and what made them fashionable. Mentioned again is the aspect of women wearing these garments for their new “Double Duty Lives.”

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Michelle Boardman explores the aspect of patriotic scarves that surfaced as a fashionable accessory during the period of time in which World War II took place. Her thesis being

“Commemorative scarves functioned to physically express one’s pride as the designs included motifs, colors and symbols, such as capital “V” for victory, that formed a common vocabulary of patriotism during the war years.”

What Boardman is saying in her thesis and throughout her argument is that it was fashionable to be patriotic and that it was encouraged by designers at the time for a woman to show her patriotism through her main avenue of self expression, which was dress and fashion. Boardman explores popular motifs and what they mean in a historical perspective. She also explores how scarves became fashionable not only as neckwear, but also as headwear due to women at work in the war effort. WOWs, or Women Ordnance Workers, helped to move head-scarves into mainstream fashion magazines as it became popular and patriotic to wear these fashions. She also points out that due to restrictions on items such glycerin, which was used in soap, women needed to find a way to cover up their less than perfect coif. Boardman supports the argument that fashion was not only impacted by rationing but also by a sense of patriotic duty.

While rationing may have been a catalyst to change in dress, something or someone had to make it fashionable. The “Double Duty” article does just that. There is a direct correlation between what was becoming fashionable and the representations of women entering the war effort. The article reads as if the magazine was telling women that it was their “Duty” to get involved with the war effort in order to be fashionable. Vogue Magazine showed that women working was patriotic. Vogue, being a leading women’s fashion magazine, would have reached an audience who was affluent enough to purchase its pages and therefore would have emboldened white-collar and high standing women to join

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the war effort. Not only did this magazine influence fashion during World War II but also changed the women who bought it.

In July, 1943, Vogue published an issue that was dedicated to women and the workforce that now was calling for all women’s support. Among articles describing how women could get directly involved in the war with the WAVEs and the WACS, there was one article soothing the fears of upper-class women who wanted to get into the workforce. *Good Mothers…Good Workers*, answered the tough questions about how society would view women if they decided to add the role of breadwinner to their resumé that already included the job of mother. The author wrote that women who found that they were talented outside of child rearing and could afford to leave their children with others should do so. “If you are this mother, take heed and take heart, for you no longer need be torn by the problem of neglecting the war to raise your children, or neglecting your children to win the war.”7 One question asked “If I work what is the best care I can give my children?”8 The response was that the reader “should” have a maid to take of the children whenever they are sick from school. Also, the reader could rest assured that children would be at school for the majority of the day and the two months of the summer they could be sent away to summer camp.

Fashion itself is not solely about the items that a person or community chooses to put on their body. The role of fashion also takes into account moral and ethical decisions. By publishing this article, Vogue was telling women that it was okay to work and support the war effort in this way. Inherently they were saying that it was fashionable to leave your children in the care of others so that you could support your family and also your country. However, Vogue was not suggesting that women who needed a second income should work; instead it was that women who were at a higher social standing

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and who could afford household help should rejoice in the fact that supporting the war effort through work was now fashionably respectable. This article has nothing to do with rationings effects on clothing, rather, Vogue’s support of women in the workforce encouraged them to dress differently in their daily lives. Connecting back to the “Doubly Duty” lives, the magazine had already shown women what to wear for their future in the war effort. Vogue was now showing women how to put their new uniform into use. Vogue was encouraging women to be patriotic and support the war effort by making it acceptable for women with a higher social standing to leave the domestic sphere and enter the workforce.

In another July, 1943 article, *Top-Flight Designer Makes Work Uniform Pretty.* Vogue noted that designers were creating fashions that would allow women to be more comfortable in the workplace. The article described the latest designs of Muriel King and focused on how these garments could be worn in various settings that were both inside and outside of the work place.

“Designed them so a girl could move among whirling machines with complete safety- no hazardous pocket-flaps, flares, loose belts. Designed them so she might go from the plant gate to a five o’clock engagement with complete assurance.”

Vogue was saying that women going to work would no longer need to worry about how she would appear once the work day was done. Instead, a simple change of accessories would allow these working ladies to be just as fashionable and feminine as if they had spent the day running errands around town. These new uniforms could be incorporated into a working woman’s everyday wardrobe. The article was accompanied by two photographs of models wearing Muriel King’s uniform designs. The first is of a jacket and skirt combination, the only way to identify that is actually a uniform is the air force plant insignia that is stitched into the sleeve. The second is of a model with her hand on her hip looking

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up into the distance in a slim shirt dress accessorized with a brooch on the collar, heavy chain bracelet and smart leather purse.

Throughout this article, it is evident that the war had a major impact on fashion. It was not only rationing that brought about these changes but also patriotic sentiments and the changing role of women on the homefront. Designers were now producing clothes that were not only uniforms but could be converted into everyday outfits. Fashions were needed to fill in the new lifestyle of the Upper and Middle class women during World War II. Day clothes would need to be appropriate for these women to straddle two different worlds: their new working world and their lives outside of the war effort. Vogue contributed to this change in that they deemed it worthy and acceptable for women to wear these new types of clothes. A respectable women could be seen in a work uniform and would be celebrated for helping her country. Patriotism was considered fashionable during the war years. Vogue’s impact on fashion during the war was through their encouragement of women to express their patriotism through the way that they dressed and ultimately making it socially acceptable for women of high standing to work outside of the home.

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**Without Paris**

Before the war, Vogue was only interested in promoting European designers. However, in 1940 that all changed when they had no other choice but to report on what women would be wearing now that they only had American designers to produce garments.\(^{13}\) As Germany invaded France, the couture houses of Paris were closed to the allied powers. Germany invaded Paris before the United States made its official entrance into the war and, because of this, American manufacturers had no access to French designs as early as 1940.\(^{14}\) As a direct result, Vogue began to feature American designers as they would have the Parisian designers in past years. Throughout the war, Vogue not only refrained from referencing Paris fashion houses in its editorials and articles but also advertisements for department stores no longer used France as the model for the garments that they carried and sold. This practice continued even after the Allied Forces liberated France from the Nazi regime in 1944.

In September, 1945 Vogue featured an article entitled, *New York Story; Ready-To-Wear Collections*, which showcased American designers as a front runner to Parisian couture.\(^{15}\) The article described how Americans would rather go to a store in New York and immediately take home what they had picked out rather than have to send an order to Paris and wait for their clothes to arrive at a much later date. It discussed the many talents that American designers possessed that matched or rivaled those talents of Parisian designers. Even with the end of the War, Vogue remained loyal to the new successes of American designers of fashion.\(^{16}\) This idea of New York as a new fashion capital gave rise to change in fashion in America. Vogue encouraged women to dress in American designs and to

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\(^{14}\) Buckland, "Promoting American Designers, 1940–44: Building Our Own House".

\(^{15}\) “New York Story; Ready-To-Wear Collections” *Vogue*, September 1, 1945.

wear clothes that were American. By doing this, the magazine embraced the fact that it was fashionable to be patriotic and show one’s patriotism through what a woman wore during the war. Daniel Delis Hill said that Vogue focused its efforts on American designers as soon as the French couture houses became unavailable to the American consumers in 1940.\textsuperscript{17}

From then on, the very few French influences that arrived in the United States were met with disinterest. Vogue’s promotion of American designers contributed to the notion of patriotism being fashionable during the Second World War. Not only did it help to stimulate the burgeoning American fashion market but it also stood as a symbol of America being a world power house. The more women bought into this concept the more likely they were to support the war effort. Vogue expressed patriotism as being the height of fashion in World War II therefore making it respectable for upper class women to demonstrate their fashionability by contributing to the war effort outside of the domestic sphere.

**Fashionable Rationing**

Vogue advertised many fashions that adhered to, and even went beyond, the L-85 restrictions on garments. The magazine and its editors supported American designers who “unlike their counterparts in Paris and London, American fashion designers incorporated silhouettes, trimmings and details from military uniforms into their collections.”\textsuperscript{18} This helped to launch the United States as a major fashion leader in the twentieth century and allowed the American fashion industry to flourish.

L-85 restrictions and rationing made an enormous impact on the fashion world in the United States during World War II. Many fashion historians are quick to assume that all garments made during

\textsuperscript{17} Hill, “As seen in Vogue; A century of American Fashion in Advertising.” 70.

\textsuperscript{18} Hill, “As seen in Vogue; A century of American Fashion in Advertising,” 71.
this time period adhered to the government mandates on fabric usage.  

After interviewing about 30 women who were over the age of thirteen in 1942, Jennifer Mower found that many of the garments these women described did not fit within the standards of L-85 restrictions. L-85s were set in place to conserve fabric for wartime usage. “The limitation order was designed to prevent rationing of wartime apparel by reducing the amount of yardage required for women's apparel by 15%.” Through Mower’s research she finds that not all garments purchased during the war by her subjects met these requirements. Also, when she looked into museum collections, there were collections of clothing that made use of rationed metals, zippers and other non-fabric conserving materials. Vogue had no part in promoting designers who refused to comply with the L-85 restrictions. The pages of the popular magazine were riddled with articles on how to go above and beyond the limitations provided. Instead of conserving the least amount of fabric, Vogue published articles displaying garments and designs that conserved the most fabric possible. The magazine promoted fashions that were patriotic and those keeping in line with L-85s. By only displaying such types of clothing, Vogue implied that clothes that did not comply with restrictions were not fashionable.

Creating versatility in a woman’s wardrobe seemed to be the goal of Vogue in the Fall of 1943. With limitations on fabric usage and overall rationing of many civilian materials needed to produce women’s clothing, there had to be a change in the mindset of consumers on the homefront. Conserving fabric was the overall goal of American households. Vogue did not shy away from the conservation tactics set in place to support the war effort. In the September 1st issue there were several editorials

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19 Jennifer Mower, ""Pretty and Patriotic": Women's Consumption of Apparel During World War II." (PhD diss., Oregon State University, 2011), 80.
20 Mower, "Pretty and Patriotic".
and articles that commented on the fabric restrictions and gave women an idea of what was both fashionable and versatile for the upcoming season.

“The 1943 silhouette, whether because of the war, L-85 or its own spring-back, has narrowed itself to a direct, sure line, an uncluttered outline, a neat underdone look...essentially what has always been the best fashion. Elegance after all means righteousness without effort; simplicity with confidence behind it....”

These narrower styles were a direct influence of the war and L-85 restrictions. The conservation of fabric for military use had implemented a Limitation Order on women’s clothing in 1943. However, instead of a backlash from designers and fashion promoters, there seemed to be an acceptance and pride for these restrictions on creative freedoms. Supporting the L-85s meant support of the war effort. Vogue’s article described the narrow silhouette as being the newest fashion sensation. This encouraged women to wear garments that met or even went beyond the Limitation Order 85. The next fifteen pages of this particular issue were filled with how to wear this new narrow look and what kind of garments met the fashionability of this trend.

21 “It Narrows Down To This” Vogue, September 1, 1943. 75.
While this editorial is different from those only a few months earlier, in that Vogue was not commenting on how to dress for work, it still sent a patriotic message to women in the United States: L-85 restrictions were not something that were oppressive to American women, instead the limitations would help America win the war and keep their natural freedoms. By wearing these types of garments and adhering to government sanctioned fashion choices, they were doing their patriotic duty as women on the home-front. Vogue was encouraging women to support the war effort by the way that they dressed and what type of clothing they chose to buy.

Vogue’s impact on fashion during the war can be seen through, *Take The Measure Of Fashion*. To be fashionable as an upper-class woman, one would need to dress in such a manner that was patriotic. This does not mean that they should adorn themselves in stars and stripes, rather that they should show the utmost respect to their country by adhering to the restrictions that would help win the war. The magazine subtly suggested that women dress themselves to do just that by featuring garments

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22 “It Narrows Down To This.” 79.
that conserved the most fabric and would be approved of by the government. In this article, Vogue reinforced the Limitation Order 85 as something that could be and would be fashionable. In a style article on the new Fall silhouette of 1943, the magazine went through a number of the restrictions set in place by the L-85s and described in detail what types of clothing would meet these standards. Describing every possible aspect of dress that a woman might find herself wondering about the article even mentioned how collars would be affected. “No coat collars wider than five inches, but they stand up around your ears and make the most of themselves. No double collars. And sometimes no collars at all”

To conserve fabric, the fashions of the time would have to change. Women had to support their country in the war. Although the impact of these government restrictions due to the war effort might not have been exactly what women and the fashion world wanted, Vogue seemed determined to be patriotic. In the introduction to this article, you can see the struggle that the magazine seemed to be having with the restrictions but they found a way to make the most of it. “This is the year our government talks softly and carries a big yardstick-L-85...But this is also the year when all good clothes gain back what they forfeit in length, width, breadth, by a dimension beyond measure-the fourth dimension of Time.” The article goes on to explain how the clothes from 1943 that tow the line of Limitation Order 85 will be timeless and classic and never go out of style. The magazine is seemingly putting a spin on a restriction that otherwise might not be taken all that well by designers and high class consumers. However, by making the clothes that meet the L-85s restrictions, the clothes that every woman should be wearing and should want to be wearing, Vogue made the government sanctioned garments fashionable. Conserving fabric for parachutes and other wartime necessities was deemed a

23 “Take The Measure Of Fashion.” Vogue. September 15, 1943. 75.
24 “Take The Measure Of Fashion.” 75.
patriotic duty by the US government with the issue of Limitation Order 85. Clothes that met the restrictions might not have been fashionable without the help of magazines like Vogue. It is clear that rationing alone was not the biggest impact on fashion during the war years, it was, in fact, the idea of dressing in support of one’s country as a patriotic duty that helped to propel rationing into fashionability.

As the War Closed

By September, 1944, fashions were already beginning to change. Although L-85 restrictions and rationing were not near an end and the war would continue for another year, designers and magazines such as Vogue were ready for a change from these strict guidelines. Fall fashions for 1944 began to ease away from the strict, military simplicity and narrowness of 1942 and 1943. Although there was no defiance against fabric conservation, “Clues to this change are everywhere. Skirts are easing up. (Still there is no unfaithfulness to L-85, either in letter or spirit.)”25 In this article, Vogue outrightly assured its readers that whatever fashions they see in the coming pages were still well within the limitation order. They were acknowledging that fashions were not being quite as conscious of saving fabric as they had in the past, but they were undoubtedly staying true to the war effort at home. In describing the silhouette of the coming year, Vogue’s fashion editorial defended the fashionability of the fuller skirt.

“Many skirts are widening, easing up, moving off the Straight and Narrow, in nice ways. Some flare off to more width at the hem. Some, Like the three sketched here, are soft all the way around, with a measured fall of fullness. But all are easily within Government regulations.”26

In the previous years of the war, Vogue had wholeheartedly supported government restrictions and here it was evident that they still did. However, in this particular season, they were encouraging women to wear less severely restricted styles of the past two years of war and, instead, dress more feminine.

25 “Autumn fashion collections… wardrobe plans, colour plans, costume plans.” Vogue. September 1, 1944. 119.
26 “Skirt situation-easing” Vogue September 1, 1944. 134.
The magazine was still encouraging women to dress within the regulations of government and support the war effort through their fashion choices. This marked a turning point in my research, in which Vogue began to move away from combining the war and fashion as one cohesive entity. At this time, I saw the shift of separation of fashion and the war; articles either talked about clothing and what was in style or only talked about the war with no regard toward a woman’s wardrobe.

Later in September 1944, Vogue’s issues left out much talk of the war. Instead, the mention of the war was limited to one extensive article. Lee Miller, the famed war correspondent for Vogue in the 1940s, had written a “tell all” of her experience in a hospital in France. She wrote solely on her experiences: the fear of air raids, the death that surrounded the hospital and people she encountered during her time there. However, the only mention of fashion and the clothes that she wore, was a tiny label under her photograph. “Lee Miller in Special U.S. Photographer’s Helmet, Her Stripes Painted on for Fun.” While this miniscule blurb of how the photographer chose to jazz up her military issued safety gear might be disregarded, the fact that it was mentioned showed that Vogue still had their eyes on what

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27 “Skirt situation-easing” 134.

28 Lee Miller, “U.S.A. Tent Hospital...In France” Vogue. September 15, 1944. 139.
was fashionable during the war. The magazine was still looking at how women dressed as a show of support for the war effort even as the closing years to the conflict were well underway.

Following Lee Miller’s article on the bravery and experience of an American war hospital was an editorial on the biggest trends of the season. With such examples as ostrich feathers, the use of fur, and what colors could be paired together, it was a crash course in what was stylish for the 1944 Fall season. However, there were no practical explanations of how these fashions intersected with the war effort at home. Vogue was separating the idea of women, fashion and the war from one another by separating them within their articles. It could have been that in the closing years of the war, society was already starting its shift of women back into the domestic sphere as is seen in the 1950s and early postwar years. In the two September issues of 1944, there is no “Why Aren’t You Working” campaign articles, nor was there an editorial on what fashions would best suit the new wardrobe of the woman involved in the war effort. In the second half of the US’s time in World War II, Vogue seemed to be impacting fashion in an entirely new way than it had in January, 1942. A new found femininity was what the editorials were now portraying. “From a collection based solely on the laudable theory of understatement by day, eloquence by night; clothes that are worldly and pretty, entirely feminine...”

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29 “By Sophie of Saks Fifth Avenue” 153.
30 “By Sophie of Saks Fifth Avenue” *Vogue*, September 15, 1944. 152.
Instead of practicality, durability and how it coincided with the war, Vogue had determined that pretty and feminine were the most important qualities of fashion at this time. The magazine featured fashion as now removed from the war. The suit was no longer a uniform and going above the call of L-85 was not of the utmost importance.

**Conclusion**

Previously it was accepted that rationing was the single factor that impacted fashion during World War II. Rationing was a major contributor, but it was also the encouragement of fashion magazines like Vogue that made being patriotic and adhering to government restrictions stylish and something women would actually want to participate in. Vogue made it socially acceptable for women to leave their homes and go to work for the war effort. They even showed women how they could dress for work and then convert into an acceptable, fashionable outfit for running around town. While the start of the war brought out a stylish wardrobe that was directly impacted by the war, the end of the war saw a decline in such attitudes. In the last two years of the war, fashion began to separate itself from the wartime wardrobe of women. At this time, Vogue found that fashion should be feminine and pretty but was still putting emphasis on American designers as being the best. Many factors went into fashion during the Second World War, Vogue helped American women stay at the forefront of it.
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