The Russian troops’ invasion of Ukraine on Thursday February 24, right in the middle of Milan Fashion Week, went nearly unnoticed on the runways. Revelling in the delight of staging physical shows and wild parties again after two years marked by the pandemic, the world of fashion has been remarkable chiefly for its indifference. Except for a few token statements against the war, fashion capitals have been filled with a deafening silence. But for a handful of exceptions.
On the eve of Paris Fashion Week, which began on Monday evening, notably with the show by Off-White, Ralph Toledano, president of the French Fashion and Haute Couture Federation, released a statement inviting all participants “to enjoy the shows in the coming days with the solemnity that is appropriate to these sad times.” He added that “the great family of fashion is gathering together for Paris Fashion Week at a time when war has brutally struck Europe, plunging the Ukrainian people in dread and pain. Creativity is based on the idea of liberty, whatever the circumstances. And the role of fashion is to contribute to individual and collective emancipation in our societies.”

In Milan, only two labels responded to the situation in their shows: Giorgio Armani and Francesca Liberatore. The former, on Sunday, chose to present its collection with no soundtrack, the models striding down the runway to the sounds of the photographers’ clicks and their own footsteps only, stirring the feelings of the guests and the people backstage too.

Armani himself explained his decision with these words: “A few hours before the show, I asked myself what I could do to mark what was happening. It wasn’t a question of sending money or clothes. Nothing like that. To express how my heart felt for its children …” and here Armani paused, overcome by emotion. “The best thing to do was to send a message saying that we aren’t happy, that we don’t want to celebrate this return to runway shows, because something is happening around us that we find greatly troubling,” he concluded.

A little later on the same day, in the former church of San Carpoforo, where she had just shown her collection, Francesca Liberatore stepped on the runway. Taking two models, one Ukrainian, one Russian, by the hands, she invited the audience to observe a minute’s silence. Here too, even a mere minute, as a mark of support for all the people affected by the conflict, was enough to spark powerful emotions.

Except for these two special moments, it was all business as usual at Milan Fashion Week, in an atmosphere of absolute exhilaration, hordes of fans gathering to catch a glimpse of starlets and influencers as they entered and exited the shows. Everyone was unfazed by the handful of protesters that had come to express their solidarity with the Ukrainian people outside the most popular shows, like those by Versace, Max Mara and Prada, where a few guests had daubed their cheeks with the colours of the yellow and blue Ukrainian flag.

A few designers expressed their feelings about the war, albeit very discreetly. Like Elisabetta Franchi, who posed surrounded by her models, the picture captioned by this message: “Backstage here, there are women from all over the world, all together, without borders. This is the kind of world I would like to see. Say ‘no’ to war.” Other
designers took a stand against war on social media. But they did so in generic fashion, on their private rather than their labels’ accounts, like the boss of Moncler, Remo Ruffini, or Alessandro Michele, the creative director of Gucci, who posted on Instagram a poem by Gianni Rodari: “There are things men should never do, not by day nor by night, neither on land nor offshore: for example, waging war.”

The Kering group posted a white square on its Instagram account. Balenciaga instead removed all previous images from its account. When users click on the blank page, a small dove appears. The label’s creative director Demna Gvasalia is of Georgian origin, and is probably more sensitive than other designers to the Ukrainians’ fate. In 2008, Russian troops invaded the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia.

Interviewed backstage just before the start of his show, the designer and founder of MSGM, Massimo Giorgetti, said that he “had found it very difficult to post on social media for a few days. But then I understood that we have to move forward. Fashion must go on.” He mirrored quite accurately the opinion of the majority of the fashion industry, which is only now beginning to get back on track after being hit by the pandemic for the last two years, and neither wants nor can afford to reverse its course.