



Introduction

ON 26 FEBRUARY 1917, Mathilda Kschessinskaya received an urgent call from General Halle, the chief of police of the fashionable Petrograd district where she lived. Kschessinskaya was not only prima ballerina assoluta of the Mariinsky Ballet, but she was also the former mistress of Nicholas II and the current mistress of Grand Duke Andrei Vladimirovich, and Halle was anxious about her security. He warned Kschessinskaya that the situation in town was very serious and advised her to save whatever she could from her house before it was too late. The revolution had begun. The ballerina looked at the possessions decorating her elegant style moderne house and felt that her situation was desperate: her most important diamond pieces were kept at Fabergé, but what was she to do with the incredible quantity of smaller items scattered around her house? When she sat down for dinner with her son, his tutor, and two dancers from the Mariinsky the following evening, shots could be heard next to her house. Kschessinskaya decided that it was time to leave. She put on her most modest fur coat, a black velvet coat trimmed with chinchilla, and threw a shawl over her head. Someone quickly lifted up her favorite fox terrier Dzhibi, whom she had almost forgotten, someone else carefully carried the traveling bag with her valuables, and they left. Kschessinskaya remained in Petrograd until July 1917, but she was not to live again in her house after that evening, finding shelter with friends and family instead. Driving past her former home, she once saw the most prominent female Bolshevik, the revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai, stroll around her garden in the ermine coat she had left behind:



FIGURE 1. Mathilda Kschessinskaya, her son, Vladimir, and her dog, circa 1910–1911.
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the Bolsheviks had commandeered Kschessinskaya's former home as their headquarters.¹

The absurd image of Alexandra Kollontai taking a stroll in Kschessinskaya's ermine coat is emblematic of the paradoxical situation Russia's imperial ballet found itself in after the October Revolution. Ermine is the fur of kings, and Kschessinskaya's ermine coat symbolized the symbiotic relationship between Russia's imperial ballet and its patron, the tsarist regime. More than any other art form, ballet was a child of aristocratic court culture, yet it not only survived the upheaval of the early revolutionary period but soon claimed its place in the official pantheon of Soviet cultural achievements. Just as Kollontai had put Kschessinskaya's ermine coat around her shoulders, the Soviet regime adorned itself with ballet.

But could the Soviet regime ever claim full ownership, or control, over ballet? Could the artistry of the imperial ballet survive and develop after a revolution that destroyed the social and political order of which ballet had formed an intrinsic part, a revolution that held the utopian promise of a new world and demanded before long that art should become an engineer of human souls, a propaganda tool serving the ideological needs of the state?

Under the tsars, several theaters had received the title "imperial," signifying their status as theaters operating under court supervision and on generous state funding. Russia's imperial ballet consisted of the ballet companies of two imperial theaters, the Mariinsky Theater of Opera and Ballet

in St. Petersburg and the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. Before the October Revolution, these two ensembles were the only public, state-supported ballet companies in Russia, even though from the late eighteenth century ballets were also performed by serf theaters maintained by aristocrats as part of Russia's flourishing private, aristocratic theatrical culture. In the last third of the nineteenth century, troupes of foreign ballet dancers began to perform in nongovernment-supported theaters springing up in the Russian provinces. After the ban on private companies in Moscow and St. Petersburg was lifted in the 1880s, touring companies also visited these two cities, especially in the summer. During the twilight years of imperial Russia, cabarets and "theaters of miniatures" emerged as centers for ballet experimentation. Strictly speaking, the Mariinsky and Bolshoi were thus not the only troupes performing in Russia, but as the only ballet companies with "imperial" status, they benefitted from the tsar's largesse and protection, enabling them to create those ballets at the heart of the classical canon that define our understanding of classical ballet to the present day. As this book is about the fate of Russia's imperial ballet after the revolution, it is therefore logical to focus on the former Mariinsky Ballet (known as Kirov Ballet for most of the Soviet period) and the Bolshoi Ballet and not on the numerous, but by comparison less significant, ballet ensembles created throughout the Soviet period.

How did Russia's formerly imperial ballet fit into the Soviet cultural project? I use the term *Soviet cultural project* to avoid the traditional emphasis on ideological control as a force that crushed artistic creativity in the Soviet Union and to emphasize instead the complexity of the relationship between art and politics in the Soviet Union as expressed in two central aspects of Soviet cultural policy. The first aspect reflects the utopian aspiration of the Russian Revolution to create a new, Socialist civilization. In its maximal definition, the Soviet cultural project aimed for nothing less than the total cultural transformation of society. This utopian vision soon began to pale before the complexity of reality, but throughout the Soviet period, the aspiration of reshaping, reeducating, and controlling the conscience of people lived on in the regime's dictatorial insistence on enlisting art to promote political and ideological allegiance.

The second aspect of the Soviet cultural project could be seen as the benign side of the educational impulse that also lay at the heart of the regime's dictatorial-utopian aspiration of social transformation and social control. The Soviet regime aspired to dispel the darkness of Russia's "backwardness" with the light of *kul'turnost'*, a broad term used to connote the general cultural level of a person. Initially, promoting *kul'turnost'* included an eclectic mix of activities, ranging from teaching workers how to brush their teeth, to

increasing literacy, to making the bastions of high culture accessible to the masses, but before long a basic knowledge of Russia's cultural achievements was expected of every Soviet citizen. The Soviet emphasis on an education that required a knowledge of the most famous products of high culture was enshrined in one of Soviet civilization's central myths, its publicly promoted self-image as "the people who read the most [*samyi chitaiushchii narod*]" in the world. Similarly, during the Cold War between the East and West, the regime tried to use its cultural prowess to demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet system as a whole. The implications of the Soviet cultural project for high culture were thus complex. On the one hand, the arts benefited from strong state support and from a state-sponsored mindset that promoted a high regard for cultural achievements as a core value of Soviet civilization. On the other hand, constraints were put on artistic development by the regime's ideologically driven attempt to control artistic creation.

Ballet also benefited from the regime's promotion of high culture. It was transformed from an elite entertainment in Moscow and St. Petersburg to a widely popular object of national pride. But despite the regime's continuous demand for "Soviet" ballets that would shape the audience's "socialist consciousness," there was little in the work of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies that successfully contributed to the regime's dictatorial-utopian aspirations of social transformation and control. In the meantime, the "class-alien," prerevolutionary classical heritage of Russian ballet continued to flourish and to spread into remote areas of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet fate of Russia's imperial ballet forms an important part of Russian cultural history. Unfortunately, historians have largely ignored this subject, even though the fraught relationship between artists and political power under the Soviet regime continued to fascinate the public imagination in the West throughout the Cold War and beyond, notably within the context of the high-profile defections of dancers such as Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Each year, there seems to be a new book on Soviet history, reflecting the opening of archives to Western historians in the post-Cold War era and the continued interest of the general public in this part of twentieth-century history, but even though the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies were among the most visible Soviet cultural ambassadors to the West during the Cold War, there is almost no new literature on this subject taking into account the opening of the archives in the 1990s. *Swans of the Kremlin* is the first archival study of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies during the first fifty years of Soviet power. While it analyses the specific problems that arose for ballet in the wake of the October Revolution and into the 1920s and 1930s, it focuses on the golden age of Soviet ballet, the 1950s and 1960s.

This book is about the remarkable resilience of artistic creativity under the Soviet regime. Despite the opening of the archives, the process of cultural production in the Soviet Union still seems to be poorly understood in the West. Often, this complex story continues to be reduced to the romantic but simplistic image of the lonely genius, cowed into submission by an omnipresent, dictatorial state. Today, almost twenty years after the end of the Cold War, Western conceptions of Soviet ballet continue to be almost exclusively based on the Cold War dictum that Soviet ballet was belligerently conservative, producing superlative performers who were tragically, maybe even hopelessly, trapped in a system that precluded any further development of the choreographic imagination, confining the artistic creativity of its star performers largely to the interpretation of the great classical repertoire. Without minimizing the ideological and political pressures on artistic creativity in the world of Soviet ballet, this picture requires revision.

Because the production histories of new ballets offer some of the best examples for the struggle for artistic autonomy, the focus of this book is not on the fate of the classical ballet repertoire in both companies, an unusually rich and complex topic that deserves a separate study. Similarly, I do not discuss the educational practice of the ballet schools of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies and their crucial role in passing on and developing Russia's prerevolutionary ballet heritage during the Soviet period. Thus *Swans of the Kremlin* is neither an exhaustive history of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies nor a comparative study of the two institutions. Instead, it uses examples from the experiences of both companies to discuss the wider issue of artistic autonomy within the field of Soviet ballet. In addition to reconstructing the struggles involved in staging new ballets, the book also puts key artistic debates within their wider political and ideological context and looks behind the scenes of significant events in Soviet ballet history, such as the Bolshoi Ballet's first tour to the West in 1956. The slight emphasis on the Kirov Ballet reflects the fact that during the period under investigation, Soviet choreography experienced a particular flowering at the Kirov.

What was the creative process in the world of Soviet ballet really like? Thanks to the enormous amount of paperwork created by the Soviet bureaucracies and the richness of this archival material, this book is primarily based on materials such as verbatim records of long debates held at the theaters and other venues, documenting the creative process at the time, although it also draws on memoirs by dancers and choreographers, most of which have been published in Russian only, and other sources. The quality of the archival records proved so high that they often offered a more reliable source for the debates of the time than oral history. Given the specific historical circumstances—the collapse of the Soviet Union and the tumul-

tuous uncertainty of the immediate post-Soviet period—events of the past may take on a different meaning with the benefit of hindsight. For example, a well-known ballerina who was very critical of the Kirov Ballet’s artistic director Konstantin Sergeev in the 1960s told me in conversation that now that she had been working in the West for several years, she realized the depth of Sergeev’s knowledge of classical ballet and appreciated it. While such reevaluations offer fascinating insights, they are less suitable for reconstructing the artistic battles of the Soviet era. I hope to offer a more nuanced picture of creative life at the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies than the one available at the present by combining extensive use of archival materials and other sources available only in Russian with an inside view into the world of Russian ballet gained through many informal discussions with former dancers of the Kirov and Bolshoi. *Swans of the Kremlin* benefited from many conversations with artists who danced with either the Kirov or Bolshoi Ballet company during the Soviet period, including Irina Kolpakova, Makharbek Vaziev (director of the Mariinsky Ballet from 1995 until 2008), Olga Chenchikova, and Evgeny Goremykin.

For the historian studying Soviet culture, questions concerning artistic autonomy and creative agency are arguably the most difficult and most interesting ones to answer. Even though ballet became one of the most celebrated Soviet cultural achievements, the glory of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies continued to rest on the “class-alien” heritage of the pre-revolutionary classical ballet repertoire created under the patronage of the tsars. Time and again, the companies “failed” to live up to official demands for more Soviet propaganda ballets that were also popular with the public. What does ballet’s resistance to being “Sovietized” tell us about the relationship between artistic thought and practice on the one hand and Soviet ideology and politics on the other hand? What does it tell us about the potential for artistic autonomy and continuity between Russia’s pre- and post-revolutionary culture under the Soviet regime?

Swans of the Kremlin analyses how the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies negotiated the restrictive and intrusive framework set for artistic creation by the Soviet regime. It shows how the ballet companies reclaimed artistic autonomy in a system that sought to deny it. Within the Soviet context, the struggle for artistic autonomy required the ability both to block out the system mentally and to play the system practically. Autonomy, in the sense of complete freedom of action, was made impossible by the regime’s close supervision of cultural production. In the world of ballet, the quest for autonomy was complicated by the fact that writing, composing, or painting “for the drawer” was not an option.

Within the Soviet context, artistic autonomy needs to be defined more

broadly as an exercised ability to maintain independent professional values, the continuity of artistic debates, and the ability to achieve purely artistic goals, such as pushing the boundaries of choreographic language. During debates that accompanied the struggle for implementing these goals, subversive artistic intentions could be hidden behind overtly orthodox ideological language. It is thus sometimes important to read between the lines of archival records. I use the term *Soviet system* to denote both tangible institutional constraints exerted on cultural production through bureaucratic oversight and censorship and less tangible mental constraints exerted by the omnipresence of ideology. The term *Soviet regime* refers to both the party and state apparatus.

I coin the term *artistic repossession* to grasp ways in which artists repossessed or creatively adapted and redefined what the Soviet regime sought to control: artists had no choice but to accept the political organizational structures and ideological frames that the regime imposed on cultural production, but they could learn to exploit them for their own artistic ends that had nothing to do with the regime's goals or the values these structures and ideological concepts were supposed to promote. Just as the owner of a house who was dispossessed might haunt the new owner and aim to repossess his property, artists in the Soviet Union tried to repossess their house of cultural production. Artistic repossession can be seen as a form of systemic subversion because it embodies tactics that operate within the system but seek to use the system to promote goals foreign to it. It demonstrates that sometimes constraints could become an enabling factor, inspiring extraordinary creativity to overcome the constraining pressure of circumstances.²

I build on some of the insights won by pioneering research in social history and ethnography like Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain*, Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Everyday Stalinism*, and Alena Ledeneva's *Russia's Economy of Favors: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* by applying them to the field of cultural history. All three of these books look at everyday practice or, in Sheila Fitzpatrick's words, "the forms of behavior and strategies of survival and advancement that people develop to cope with particular social and political situations."³ As Kotkin has pointed out in his study of Magnitogorsk in the 1930s, ordinary people developed ways to resist the terms of daily life that developed within the crusade of building socialism: "One resists, without necessarily rejecting, by assessing, making tolerable, and, in some cases, even turning to one's advantage the situation one is confronted with."⁴

If Kotkin explicitly regards actions normally seen as passive or "deviant" as resistance and is guided by the belief that "the subject of inquiry should include not only what was repressed or prohibited but what was made possible or produced,"⁵ Ledeneva goes one step further. In her study of *blat* and

the Russian economy of favors, Ledeneva shows how practices that were necessary for the functioning of the Soviet system in economic and practical terms could ultimately be subversive of the system in terms of ideology and emphasizes the enabling power of constraints.⁶ My work extends this approach to the study of Soviet cultural history by investigating strategies of resistance that ultimately subverted the ideology of the Soviet system within the context of the artistic life of the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies.

I use the term *resistance* not in the sense of acts of outright, active opposition but in James C. Scott's understanding of everyday resistance as a "weapon of the weak" in face of political and practical restraints.⁷ No matter how unequal the relationship between artistic creation and political power appeared to be in the Soviet Union, it was a two-way relationship of mutual influence that included the potential of artistic subversion of political-ideological power. My analysis of power relations thus reflects Michel Foucault's emphasis on the relationship between power relations and confrontation strategies and his contention that "there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight."⁸

In terms of political context, this book focuses on the Khrushchev era but also discusses events of the immediate postrevolutionary period, the impact of Stalinism on Soviet ballet, and closes with a ballet produced during the Brezhnev era, Yuri Grigorovich's *Spartacus*. Given the goal to assess everyday tactics developed by artists to reclaim artistic autonomy from an omnipresent regime, it does not discuss the extraordinary experience of the Second World War and the Kirov and Bolshoi Theaters' evacuations from Leningrad and Moscow but instead emphasizes the 1950s and 1960s, a golden era of Soviet ballet that witnessed a stormy reinvigoration of Soviet choreography, pitting defenders of Stalinist orthodoxies against innovators, the emergence of a new, highly talented generation of dancers, and the end of Soviet ballet's geographic isolation with the onset of Cold War cultural exchange.

It is important to add that the division of cultural history into neat political-historical units can be methodologically helpful, but the transition between different eras is in reality more fluid. While the cultural Thaw of the Khrushchev period undoubtedly provided an important impetus and crucial opportunities, the golden era of Soviet ballet at the center of this book should not be reduced to the political context of the Thaw. It extended well into a different period of Soviet cultural politics, which included Khrushchev's showdown with the creative intelligentsia in 1962 and 1963 and the early Brezhnev period. The year 1968 was chosen as cutoff date because the premiere of Grigorovich's celebrated version of Aram Khachaturian's ballet *Spartacus* within the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the revolu-

tion seemed an appropriately important historical occasion, especially because this production became, for many, synonymous with Soviet ballet. The 1970s and 1980s merit a separate study as they were defined by somewhat different problems and opportunities arising before the backdrop of Brezhnevite stagnation and Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost.

By analyzing the struggle for artistic autonomy at the Kirov and Bolshoi during the first fifty years of Soviet power, I hope to help redress the neglect of ballet in the study of culture under the Soviet regime and to offer new insights in the complex relationship between art and power in the Soviet Union. *Swans of the Kremlin* focuses not so much on the repression of artists and the curtailing of artistic creativity by censorship as on the ways in which artists managed to navigate the Soviet cultural system and to shape the destiny of their art form despite systemic constraints. Ultimately, ballet proved stronger than politics. Even though the regime tried to impose ideological limits on artistic creation, even though there were borderlines that could not be crossed, the ambiguity inherent in any system created room for the artistic repossession of creative freedom. However hard the regime tried to control artistic life, artists at the Kirov and Bolshoi Ballet companies developed strategies to cope with the political-ideological realities of the life of an artist in the Soviet Union, reclaiming, to a certain extent, autonomy from a system they had no choice but to accept. By doing so, incremental adaptation could thus become a form of resistance, leading to a subversion of the system without necessarily presupposing its conscious rejection by the artists.