

Soviet Leap: Oppression, Defection, and Re-Envisioning Ballet

Grace Kathryn Martin is a senior majoring in Dance and History. She is from Centreville, Virginia. This article is a section of her senior thesis for History under the direction of Dr. Adrian Finucane.

Abstract:

Throughout the Cold War, Soviet ballet dancers defected to America in hopes of finding artistic freedom. After their defections they played a critical role in shaping what can be considered today's American ballet. By exploring how foreign dancers were able to contribute so much to an American cultural establishment, one can start to understand the distinct differences between the cultures behind capitalist America and the communist Soviet Union during the 1900s. Three specific dancers, George Balanchine, Natalia Makarova, and Mikael Baryshnikov made significant contributions to American ballet. When put together, their contributions form the core of the American art form seen on stages across the nation and abroad today.

Nina Ananiashvili, a famous Georgian ballerina, once said, "ballet is not just movement, not simply abstract. It's something beautiful."¹ Ballet is movement that expresses much more than a story; it has the ability to examine cultural and political changes of the time through movement. It is the meaning behind the choreography that expresses the deeper cultural significance. Ballet becomes especially important to examine in times of extreme cultural upheaval within a country, or during times of cultural competition between nations. Both of these scenarios can be seen during the Cold War, with the new Bolshevik Revolution's creation of a Soviet society and the reaction of the United States to its communist competitors.

The Soviet Union and the United States fostered very different artistic atmospheres throughout most of the 20th century. The Soviet Union used art, especially ballet, which had been a popular art form in the country beginning in 1689, as a way to spread its political message. Within the United States, ballet was seen as a copied art form, derivative

of its predecessors with little to offer to the general public. Opposing Soviet and American cultures cultivated a fascinating partnership of artistry that became the unique American ballet style. The oppression Soviet dancers faced created a desire for them to expand the boundaries of ballet, while the artistic freedom of American artists never encouraged them to dream for more. As a result, Soviet defectors created new choreography that would become the new Americanized brand of ballet.²

Historians have looked at ballet as a way to study culture as it pertains to history. For instance, Cadra McDaniel deals with the cultural exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union when the Bolshoi Ballet Company toured America in 1959.³ McDaniel uses this exchange to examine the cultural tension between the two nations. She then goes on to argue that the Soviets believed "ballets were to be uncomplicated and convey a clear pro-Soviet message that can be grasped easily without words or an in-depth explanation."⁴ The pro-Soviet message that was supposedly conveyed through their ballets was not picked

¹ Nancy Ellison, *The Ballet Book: Learning and Appreciating the Secrets of Dance* (New York: Universe, 2003), 46.

² Cyril W. Beaumont, *A Short History of Ballet* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1933), 25.

³ Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 1.

⁴ *Ibid*, xxii.

up by American audiences. McDaniel also highlights the idea of artists as “leading representatives of either the talent that could flourish in the free capitalist West or the representatives of Communism’s artistic superiority.”⁵ However, even though her book looks at the importance of cultural ties with ballet and spends some time talking about the importance of specific artists to the spreading of cultural messages, it lacks an explanation about the overall effect culture had during the time period. By zoning in on one exchange she misses many other crucial events that demonstrated how culture took on a vital role in the debate of whether capitalism or communism was the better system.

Another perspective of the ballet world during the Cold War comes from historian Christina Ezrahi. She focuses on how ballet was used as a dissident movement within the Soviet Union during the later years of the Cold War. In order to do this, Ezrahi starts by explaining the effects the Bolshevik Revolution had on ballet, and how the Soviet system shaped ballet in a way that could be used for its own benefit.⁶ Soviets believed that ballet could help fill their “ideological propaganda needs of the emerging dictatorial state,” which put strict rules on what could be created by ballet choreographers of the time.⁷ She then goes on to talk about specific choreographers who were able to somewhat break the mold and create pieces to challenge the Soviet system.⁸ Ezrahi starts to hint at the importance a restrictive system has on cultivating artistic expression.

This paper will examine the effect cultural and political pattern the Cold War had on certain artists. Dancers who choose to defect were able to leave the Soviet Union and come to America, where they could express their

artistic ideas on stages that were more welcoming than those of their homeland. It is important to look at this aspect of ballet history and Cold War history because it shows how the communist and the capitalist systems failed in certain regards. The communist society restricted its artists to an extent that made them rebel against the system and leave. The capitalist system provided freedom, but it did not provide the training and experience necessary to utilize it. More significantly, however, this paper goes on to demonstrate that the combination of the two systems brought together under a cultural lens produced something beautiful that withstands the tests of time.

Ballet has a rich history beginning in the 15th century in the Italian Renaissance Courts.⁹ By the 16th century it was being performed in courts across Europe, and was well known for its role in Louis XIII’s court where the king himself often played the lead roles in ballet productions.¹⁰ It was not yet an established art form, but instead a form of entertainment involving elaborate costumes and masks. The tradition of ballet coming out of the courts stuck with the art form, and even today ballet is considered a “high art,” an art form normally enjoyed by the wealthy. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, which allowed ballet to reach the masses and become a relevant art form in American society today.

The present form of ballet established its foundation in the early 1800s when Carlo Blasis created and wrote the first pedagogy for classical ballet.¹¹ This is especially important, because dance pedagogy determines how a dancer is trained and brought up, and therefore affects the way they perform and the choreography they create. There are many

⁵ *Ibid*, xxx.

⁶ Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 28.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ *Ibid*, 102.

⁹ Beaumont, *A Short History of Ballet*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 20. Pedagogy is a method of teaching, in ballet this refers to the different ways to structure and teach a ballet class in order to achieve the best results.

different forms of dance pedagogy today, one of them being the American form created by Soviet defectors. Although the first pedagogy was created in the early 19th century, ballet began to find its modern shape in the middle of the 19th century. During this period, ballet became known for its prima ballerinas instead of the ensemble as a whole, and in order to draw in crowds a big name needed to be attached to the program.¹² Russian dancers began to dominate the ballet world by the end of the 19th century as a result of the state schools, which were sponsored by the czar.¹³ Although ballet experienced many changes during its infancy, the 20th century brought a new level of maturity and a revival of audience appreciation.

To fully grasp how and why Soviet defectors had the impact they did on American ballet, one must first understand the artistic environment that they were trained in. The Soviet Union was established in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Before the revolution, ballet represented the interests of the wealthy and was supported by the imperial czar and his followers. It was not easily accessible to the general public, but it was known around the world for producing spectacular dancers with flawless technique.¹⁴ After the revolution, however, as Ezrahi described in her book, “the political, ideological, and economic consequences of the revolution put the survival of ballet into question.”¹⁵ The communist leadership needed to decide whether or not ballet could be used to benefit its new government, or if it was too laced in the traditions of a past Russia they

were trying to separate themselves from. Eventually it was decided to open ballet up to the masses and make it a public event that everyone in society could enjoy.¹⁶ They did this not only to strip it of its imperial past, but utilized it as a tool to spread the communist ideology.

The communist takeover of ballet had important consequences for the ballet dancers as well as the choreography produced. Ezrahi explains that the “theaters were expected to build a repertoire that contributed to the state’s ideological goals.”¹⁷ They started to limit the ballet performances by all of the Russian ballet companies and strictly forbid any Western ballets from being staged.¹⁸ McDaniel clarifies that “artistic innovation needed to maintain conformity with the doctrines of Socialist Realism and thus be representative of communist teachings.”¹⁹ The communist leadership gave ballet directors social ideologies that they wanted to see expressed in the new ballets being produced and this precedent lasted throughout the Cold War. These limitations often caused ballets to be thrown out at the last minute, leaving both dancers and choreographers frustrated with the system. Natalia Makarova, a prima ballerina for the Kirov Company, explains that “the ballet is supposed to reflect the nation’s successes, space flights, [the] up-to-date realty-quite incompatible with the abstract nature of ballet.”²⁰ Trying to emulate these concepts was hard for choreographers and dancers alike and quickly stirred up discontent within the ballet companies. It also made choreography dry and

¹² *Ibid*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid*, 31.

¹⁴ Technique is the form of the body and the way it moves from one position to another in ballet. Different techniques lead to different performance qualities and there are many different established techniques in ballet.

¹⁵ Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 30. Repertoire is the collection of ballet productions that a company performs. They recycle the shows and often perform more popular shows once every season.

¹⁸ Barbara Aria, *Misha: The Mikhail Baryshnikov Story* (New York: Saint Martins Press, 1989), 54.

¹⁹ McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy*, 41.

²⁰ Natalia Markarova, *A Dance Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1979), 76.

boring for both the dancers and the audience members.

The biggest advantage to ballet in the Soviet Union was the wide audience artists were able to reach because of the unrestricted access the state gave to ballet. This resulted in increased exposure and popularity for ballet stars. Barbara Aria uses the analogy that “ballet is to the Russian people, including the ordinary working people, what baseball is to Americans: an irreplaceable part of national life, complete with the most loyal of fans.”²¹ This is an important comparison because it gives insight not only into Russian society, but also American culture. Ballet became a popular past time for Soviet comrades, and it was a part of the Russian culture that they took pride in. The popularity of ballet also led the Soviets to believe that they could use it as a political tool in foreign policy.²² Soviet ballet companies were allowed to tour in hope that the ballets would spread the communist ideology outside the Soviet Union.²³ The need to spread communist ideals outweighed the risk of dancers defecting. While on tour they kept their dancers under the security of KGB agents, but this was not always enough to keep them from abandoning their native country. The lure of Western artistic freedom became too much for some artists to resist.

What was so special about American artistic freedom that provided such a draw for young Soviet dancers? It was actually surprising that so many talented Russians ended up in America, where ballet was not well known or respected. Americans did not start to view ballet until the mid-19th century when European companies came on tours around the U.S.²⁴ The United States was much more

known for its rising musical theater presence and modern dance scene. The ballet that did exist in America was not considered American ballet; instead it was considered a copy of ballet from France, Italy and Russia.²⁵ Although Americans had artistic freedom, they lacked the training necessary to produce a unique ballet form. Before the presence of Soviet defectors, American companies never even toured outside the United States and therefore had no chance of being taken seriously on a global scale.²⁶ The United States was in desperate need of fresh, new artists to breathe life into the American ballet system.

Soviet defectors would fill the artistic void in America and their place in the Soviet system put them in prime position to defect. There were common traits across most defectors which reveal the restrictiveness of the Soviet government across all disciplines. Jay Bergman examined these criteria. He states, “Soviet oppression is traceable to a denial of the inherent worth and inviolability of the individual; individual freedom and autonomy were destroyed when Soviet leaders applied collectivist principles to the organization of social and political life.”²⁷ When a government tries to control all aspects of a person’s life it is easy to suffocate the person. Bergman also lists traits defectors had in common, such as they often had the opportunity to travel outside of the Soviet Union for work, they all experienced some kind of political doubt mixed with personal repressed interests, and they all gradually became more discontented with the Soviet Union.²⁸ Bergman’s most profound point about defectors is that “defectors [were], at the time of their defection, employed by the political system they repudiate, often in

²¹ Aria, *Misha*, 46.

²² McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy*, xix.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Beaumont, *History of Ballet*, 61.

²⁵ A.H. Franks, *Ballet: A Decade of Endeavour* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1981), 48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁷ Jay Bergman, “The Memoirs of Soviet Defectors: Are They a Reliable Source about the Soviet Union?” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 31 (1989): 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

positions of responsibility and power.”²⁹ Ballet dancers were held as valuable assets in the Soviet system and received many benefits, as well as being prominent public figures. These benefits, however, came with a personal responsibility and set limitations that many found to be unacceptable.

Narrowing the scope more specifically to ballet, defection often came after years of trying to cater to the regime’s demands. Although dancers were civil servants, they often did not see why ballet had to be so closely tied to the politics of the Soviet Union.³⁰ Artists had to play a game with the authorities, convincing them that they were following Soviet ideology in order to experiment with their own artistic visions.³¹ The constant pressure of pleasing the authorities made the stage feel more like a prison than an escape for many young Soviet dancers.³² While art will always have some political ties, a lack of political freedom leads to a lack of artistic freedom, which was the primary motivation for Soviet defections among dancers.

Defection led to the spread of art, which enriched other nations, such as the United States. George Balanchine, Natalia Makarova, and Mikael Baryshnikov were three artists who defected to the United States at different times, but they all left lasting impacts on American ballet. Elizabeth Kendall looks at the displacement of Russian dancers and examines the potential impact their art had on other places:

“taking their art all over the world
putting down roots in places where

dance had never existed, trying again and again to capture, in the corporeal power of this wordless medium, some of the savagery and the beautiful physical longings of the century that gave them birth.”³³

To go from a country where dance had such a vibrant history to a country where the history was nonexistent gave each artist the opportunity to leave their footprint on the development of the art form. All three of the artists listed above also had an excellent accumulation of interviews or biographies and autobiographies that gave insight into their personal artistic journey from Russia to the United States. Bergman said that “defector memoirs can tell us much about defectors and about the society they repudiated.”³⁴ Though this is true, they also can give important insight into the effects they have on the societies they enter after their defection. Looking closely at Balanchine, Makarova, and Baryshnikov will show the drastic impact they had on American ballet and how their Russian background put them in an invaluable position to have such an extreme influence.

Balanchine is one of the most well-known dancers from the 20th century. In 1924, Balanchine, while on tour in Germany, fled to Paris and thereby defected from the Soviet Union.³⁵ Unlike many other defectors who struggled with their decision, Balanchine “never doubted, [he] always knew: if [he] ever had the chance, [he would] go!”³⁶ His enthusiasm was clear in many statements that he made, and he believed that the Soviet Union

²⁹ *Ibid*, 1.

³⁰ Rudolf Nureyev, *Nureyev: An Autobiography with Pictures* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1963), 14.

³¹ Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 84.

³² Aria, *Misha*, 2.

³³ Elizabeth Kendall, “A Doorway to Revolution: The Revolution in dance that was underway in 1900 mirrored the upheavals to come in this century,” *Dance Magazine*, January,

1999. 80, Accessed October 8, 2015.

<http://www.dancemagazine.com/>

³⁴ Bergman, “The Memoirs of Soviet Defectors,” 23.

³⁵ Robert Gottlieb, *George Balanchine* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 163.

³⁶ Solomon Volkov, *Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky: Interviews with George Balanchine* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 98.

was a completely different place than the Russia of his childhood before the revolution, so he did not leave his home; instead he left a developing system he did not agree with.³⁷ This was an important aspect of his dancing, because unlike other Russian defectors, he did not feel a need to incorporate his Russian roots into his choreography. It is also important to consider that Balanchine was trained in the Imperial Russian ballet technique and the Saint Petersburg Imperial Theatre School and grew up performing story ballets.³⁸ He moved around Europe with his mentor, Sergei Diaghilev, for the ten years before receiving an invitation to travel to America to start a dance school. Balanchine “wanted to go to America; [he] thought it would be more interesting there, something would happen, something different.”³⁹ So on October 18, 1933 he traveled to New York City on board the Olympic and started his journey of changing American ballet.⁴⁰ His early career in the United States, however, took time to build momentum and included many hurdles.

During Balanchine’s first year in America, his main role was supplying choreography for donors, and teaching the youth that attended his new school, which would go on to become one of the most prestigious ballet schools in the country. He opened his academy, School of American Ballet, in Chicago three months after arriving in America.⁴¹ He believed that he needed to train dancers in a specific way in order for them to be able to perform his choreography to its fullest potential.⁴² Through

multiple jobs with different companies, he quickly earned himself a reputation of being highly professional and motivated.⁴³ Although he appreciated his outside work, his real focus was dedicated to his ballet school. By the end of 1948, his full attention was focused on the School of American Ballet as well as Ballet Society.⁴⁴ Ballet Society was a dance company that Balanchine established in 1945, and was based on subscription instead of ticketing to the general public.⁴⁵ This made it more prestigious and sparked the curiosity of the press because only subscribers could go to the performances, and therefore the press had to subscribe in order to gain entry.⁴⁶ Later in Balanchine’s career, in 1964, Ballet Society would go on to become the New York City Ballet.⁴⁷ This was a momentous achievement for Balanchine, because along with a new name the company received a permanent location and finally gave him a true home, which he had lacked since his defection from Russia.

While Balanchine is well known for the school and company that he started, he is better known for the technique and the pedagogy that he brought to America. One part of Balanchine’s choreography was the lack of a story in many of his ballets. Although, “[he was] not against story in ballet,” he wanted to explore musicality on a deeper level.⁴⁸ This is especially contradictory to his Russian training because, as Balanchine describes, “plain dancing, without a story, is not approved in Russia now; it’s given the strange name “formalism.”⁴⁹ This formalism is what went on

³⁷ *Ibid*, 165.

³⁸ Kendall, “A Doorway to Revolution,” 80. A story ballet is a ballet that follows a story line. Most of these revolve around one primary character that must face a set of obstacles in order to achieve a goal. Most story ballets revolve around a love story.

³⁹ Volkov, *Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky*, 107. Sergei Diaghilev was an important ballet patron in Russia who was responsible for finding and sponsoring many young choreographers during the late 19th century and early 20th century. George Balanchine was the last artist he sponsored before his death in 1929.

⁴⁰ Gottlieb, *George Balanchine*, 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 80.

⁴² *Ibid*.

⁴³ Don McDonagh, *George Balanchine* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 79.

⁴⁴ Gottlieb, *George Balanchine*, 149.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 108-109.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 113.

⁴⁸ Volkov, *Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky*, 113.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 160.

to become neoclassical ballet in America. It also got people talking about ballet because non-story ballets had rarely been seen anywhere in the world before. His style has also been described by Don McDonough, a writer of one of Balanchine's many biographies, as "simply denser and faster, thus music has dictated virtually every aspect of his art: it changed the technique of dancers to be used and determines the length of the works, and sets the tone of the ballets, which accounts for their truly astonishing variety."⁵⁰ Through his choreography, the audience could see the music through movement. It is this tie with the music that made it possible for Balanchine to veer away from story ballets.

Balanchine had a different way of understanding music, and it was through unique musical interpretations that some of his best works were produced. He explained the way he choreographed to music: "So you sit and think, how do you make the movement go with the musical line and not with the accents within a bar? If in the music there is a strong accent, the dance doesn't have to have one."⁵¹ One of his first famous non-story based ballets was called *Serenade*; it was performed at an estate party for a patron in 1935.⁵² This piece would later become one of the most popular pieces in Balanchine's repertoire because of its exceptional musicality and visual aesthetics. It was also considered very abstract, especially for the time at which it was being performed. Abstraction goes completely against the Soviet principles of straight forward propaganda and Balanchine's continual progression towards the abstract signified complete break from the Soviet system.

Forty-six years after Balanchine, another famous Russian dancer decided to defect from the Soviet Union and would later end up in America, where she would leave her mark. Natalia Makarova, in September 1970, decided to ask for asylum while on tour in England with the help of some of her foreign friends.⁵³ Unlike Balanchine, Makarova struggled with her decision to defect even though she said that the West's "variety in everything, starting with balletic styles and ending with material goods, was always very tempting for [her]."⁵⁴ For many artists, seeing the outside world while on tour often swayed them in their decision to leave the Soviet Union. Makarova was also growing steadily more frustrated with the Soviet system and how it was affecting her dancing; she explained that "frantic boredom and weariness were building up inside [her]. [She] felt like starting over again with everything, but [she] didn't know where or how to begin and struggled to drive away [her] gloomy thought."⁵⁵ It is somewhat spectacular that she did not have a plan devised when she defected but her attempt was successful.

Shortly after her defection, Makarova decided to journey to America in order to move forward and begin the next phase of her dance career. Her first step was to accept a job as a principle at the American Ballet Theater.⁵⁶ Makarova believed that her real first job in America was "simply to survive; there was no time even to think about whether [she] liked it or not."⁵⁷ Like many defectors, the transition to the West had changed Makarova and it reflected in her dance performances. When she was on stage she brought a performance quality that had never been seen before in America

⁵⁰ McDonough, *George Balanchine*, 15.

⁵¹ Volkov, *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky*, 140.

⁵² Gottlieb, *George Balanchine*, 56.

⁵³ Richard Austin, *Natalia Makarova: Ballerina* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1978), 54.

⁵⁴ Markarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 85.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁶ Austin, *Natalia Makarova*, 57. A principle dancer is the highest position a dancer can achieve within a dance company. A principle dancer only dances lead roles and is paid much more per performance than other dancers in the company.

⁵⁷ Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 93.

and crowds were fascinated by this different kind of stage presence. Richard Austin, described the crowd at her first performance of *Giselle*; “the house was crammed, and the tension on both sides of the curtain enormous: but at the end the audience rose to her, and the press was equally enthusiastic.”⁵⁸ A new Russian star had entered the American ballet dance scene and she would make her own mark on American ballet.

Unlike Balanchine, Makarova’s main contribution to shaping American ballet was her stage presence, one that many performers after her tried to emulate. Makarova believed the openness of creativity in the West made it possible to explore new levels of emotion on stage.⁵⁹ Her performance emulated many American qualities such as individuality, passion, and the ability to show emotion, which helped audiences connect with her dancing. She also brought a new influence to the way dancers worked with choreographers; she wanted to work with the choreographer, not just for them.⁶⁰ She wanted a choreographer to use her own personality as a way to shape the movement that she would perform. She believed that if a choreographer could do this they would portray a fresh vision every time they choreographed.⁶¹ Of course, it is easier for a Prima Ballerina to ask this of a choreographer, but by doing so she was able to further her performance and capture the hearts of American audiences.

Four years after Makarova’s defection, the Soviet Union lost the last major artist who would choose to defect to the West. Mikael Baryshnikov was a child prodigy who grew up in the Soviet system. However, he was

rambunctious and had caused problems early in his career by trying to expand his dancing past Soviet boundaries. As a result, he was not normally permitted to leave the country on tour for fear that he might defect. The Soviet Union decided, in 1974, to send him to Toronto, Canada on a short tour supervised by KGB bodyguards. Baryshnikov was able to plan a clever escape with the help of western allies at the end of one of his performances, and then he quickly crossed the American border where they were waiting to offer him asylum.⁶² After his defection, Baryshnikov said that “change in any person’s life is propelled by an almost primal need to explore, to test boundaries. [He] just [followed] that urge.”⁶³ He believed he needed the challenge of the unfamiliar in order to expand his own art, and he so desperately wanted to explore what the West had to offer.⁶⁴ Baryshnikov’s defection was more highly publicized than any of the artists of the past, so he quickly rose to the top of the American ballet world in New York City.

Since the establishment of Balanchine’s New York City Ballet Company, as well as the establishment of American Ballet Theater, New York City became the place for young dancers to become stars. In the case of Baryshnikov, he was already a star, but he wanted a stage to show off all that he could do. It took Baryshnikov more time than he originally expected to adapt to life in the West.⁶⁵ Baryshnikov first found a safe haven at the New York City ballet under Balanchine himself. He worked on Balanchine’s repertoire and performed in several of their productions before he decided to leave for the American Ballet Theatre (ABT).⁶⁶ As he became more

⁵⁸ Austin, *Natalia Makarova*, 57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 56-57.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid*.

⁶² Aria, *Misha*, 2.

⁶³ Alison Beard, “Life’s Work: An Interview with Mikhail Baryshnikov,” *Harvard Business Review*, May, 2011. Accessed

October 8, 2015. <https://hbr.org/2011/05/lifes-work-mikhail-baryshnikov>.

⁶⁴ Aria, *Misha*, 57.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 96.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 94.

comfortable his lively personality started to influence his decisions, and his new freedom was reflected in his overconfidence and his ability to take risks, such as leaving New York City Ballet. While at ABT, Baryshnikov became the turning point for the company by increasing ticket sales and giving them their best box office season ever in 1968.⁶⁷ He thrived on the idea that his performance created such a drastic turn for an American ballet company additionally, he loved how he pushed ballet into the entertainment industry.⁶⁸ His popularity not only stemmed from his dance performances, but also his constant appearances in popular media, including movie productions. He branched out into movies because it was a sphere that had previously been off limits to him; his movie career helped elevate his dancing career.⁶⁹ Starting in the early 1980s, Baryshnikov began to reach for more by balancing jobs as a dancer, director, and on occasion choreographer.

Many believe Baryshnikov to be one of the greatest dancers ever in American ballet. Baryshnikov managed to bring ballet into the popular media and, by doing so, he created a wider audience base for American ballet, an audience base that would stick with ballet for decades. Baryshnikov finally did what others before him had attempted: “he had given ballet a place in the American heartland.”⁷⁰ Baryshnikov also played another pivotal role in transforming American ballet. Once he came on as the artistic director at ABT, he introduced many different types of choreographers to the company. He made it acceptable for a company to produce dancers that could perform many different styles on a whim, making the company and the dancers more diverse. He did not want his dancers to feel restricted, so he offered them a variety of

dance styles and choreographers in order to challenge them. Baryshnikov believes that “whatever new craft you learn has to go through your own psychology, your own body and mind, in order to come out as something revealing and interesting for the audience.”⁷¹ This philosophy helped ABT succeed and become one of the most dynamic American ballet companies of its time. He didn’t want ballet be defined by strict boundaries and American ballet became open to the idea of contemporary choreographers that now shape the ballet world in the 21st century. His previous oppression in an inflexible Soviet system led to such an open stance for his dance company. Baryshnikov’s open mindedness and creative genius helped foster this transition and kept ballet viable in a time of artistic competition.

All three artists took steps to shape different aspects of a new American ballet. Balanchine created a pedagogy and technique that America could claim as its own. Makarova demonstrated stage presence that enthralled audiences and brought a new depth to American performance quality. Lastly, Baryshnikov brought American ballet into the popular light, giving it an audience that could support a large American ballet community, as well as helping American ballet transition into a new time of contemporary ballet. Before Balanchine, Markova, and Baryshnikov, American ballet was nothing more than a shell of other nation’s ballets thrown onto American dancers. After their influence, American ballet reflected the culture of America; it gave American ballet companies the ability to tour because other nations wanted to see what America had to offer. Other nations wanted to commission American choreography for their own companies. Russian artists brought a

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 100.

⁶⁸ *Aria, Misha*, 141.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 205.

⁷¹ Beard, “Lifes Work.”

freedom to American ballet that would be emulated by other ballet companies across the globe.

Although Balanchine, Makarova, and Baryshnikov's accomplishments in American ballet can stand alone, together they cover every aspect of ballet, which is what makes them impressive as a whole. It is important to look at how their contribution worked together to shape American ballet. Balanchine started to lay the groundwork for the acceptance of American ballet in the 1930s and 40s when he opened his school and his company.⁷² Once Balanchine planted the seed in American minds that ballet could be an American art form, Baryshnikov helped ballet really capture the influence of new audience members and raised tickets sales three times from what they had been before his defection.⁷³ Makarova brought mystery into ballet, creating an intrigue that American audiences had not seen before; Austin believes that "if art were no longer a mystery, it would no longer be relevant to us, and I know when I watch [Makarova] dance that the secret remains, hidden behind her watchful eye."⁷⁴ Even though Baryshnikov is attributed to the creation of a larger audience base in ballet, all three of the defectors played their role in making the expansion of the audience base possible.

Balanchine is known for his teaching ability and the growth of ballet schools across America, but he was not the only defector who changed how ballet was taught in America. Balanchine believed that he would be remembered for his teaching not his choreography.⁷⁵ In hindsight, it is clear that he will be remembered and praised for both. Balanchine's teaching is remembered so prominently because, according to Aria, he

"was a Russian who had managed to tap the American dream by defining a form of ballet inspired by American tastes."⁷⁶ Every student is intrigued by the idea of learning a dance style that is strictly their own culture. It reflects national pride, which is a staple of American society. Balanchine created the teaching method, but Baryshnikov made it popular. His admirable career inspired many young people to want to dance, and attendance at dance schools increased after his defection, especially among male dancers.⁷⁷ It takes time for anything to develop, and it took time for Balanchine's teaching to spread. Baryshnikov helped it spread quicker and further than Balanchine was able to do alone. The two men worked together to create a situation where young students everywhere wanted to study American ballet and become ballet dancers.

The Soviet defectors were given a unique advantage when it came to media attention. At the height of the Cold War anything that made the Soviet Union look bad and the United States look good showed up all over newspapers, news stations, and other forms of popular media. Defectors were given multiple interviews, because everyone wanted to hear about why they left the Soviet Union. However, some artists, like Makarova, did not want to talk about the Soviet Union in a negative light; she said "almost everyone expected me to abuse the Soviet Union, but I had no desire to criticize my country, since I harbored no ill will against it. My personality was reflected in these interviews incompletely and tangentially, and I didn't make use of the chance I was given as a Russian defector to speak out."⁷⁸ She regretted not using her status as a defector to help her career and to explain why, although she loved Russia, she could not

⁷² McDonagh, *George Balanchine*, 95.

⁷³ Aria, *Misha*, 132.

⁷⁴ Austin, *Natalia Makarova*, 90.

⁷⁵ Gottlieb, *George Balanchine*, 194.

⁷⁶ Aria, *Misha*, 141-142.

⁷⁷ Regina Zarhina, "Russian Invasion: The Third World," *Dance Magazine*, January, 1998. 76.

⁷⁸ Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 94.

tolerate its oppression of artistic creativity. Her defection, in particular, caused a lot of news attention because it was not clear why she had chosen to defect. According to the Chicago Tribune, “the questions of critics seemed to be more concerned with her attitude towards the West and her homeland than her art.”⁷⁹ Makarova was bombarded with questions about her Russian counterparts and what they were facing at home instead of what her future artistic plans might be. Fantastical stories explaining her defection were made up about romantic affairs and even mental illness.⁸⁰ This helped create her fan base, because people thought she was mysterious and wanted to see her perform in hopes of figuring out her secrets.

Unlike Makarova, Baryshnikov reveled in the media attention and intentionally used it to benefit his career. Aria thought that the reason the press was so fascinated with Baryshnikov is because “not only had a major personality just landed on the doorsteps of America, but that he was causing huge upheavals in the world of dance.”⁸¹ He did this by creating romances with ballerinas and communicating with the press on a regular basis. He also was attractive and straight, so the nation quickly fell in love. Two years after his defection, he started to participate in Hollywood films that also let him reach out to another audience and deepen his fan base. The media gave all defectors an opportunity to be viewed on the same level as American movie stars, which was a status no other American dancer had received before.⁸² Balanchine did not use the media as much to his advantage. His defection was also not

viewed as a victory for the West at the time, because it was before World War II and the Cold War had not yet begun. This is an example of how American culture also grew throughout the 20th century. The media began to be a primary component of culture, especially as televisions and news became a normal fixture in the homes of Americans.⁸³ As news networks grew, so did the coverage on events, such as defections, and therefore the later defections drew an abundance of media attention. The media also started to cover “fluff pieces,” like celebrity drama, which the public craved and defectors had drama written all over them.⁸⁴ The media has gained an increasingly important role in all aspects of American life and influences the popularity of things such as ballet, when it brought attention to those who perform it.

The change in American ballet was apparent within America, but more importantly, it was also apparent abroad. When the international stage recognizes a nation for its contribution to an old and respected art form, it is clear that the new art will make a substantial impact in the future. It is also important for a new art form to get international credit in order for it to be cultivated and grow. Balanchine’s New York City Ballet Company was the first American ballet company to have a recognized international tour in 1955.⁸⁵ His work confused and excited foreign audiences and it even toured within the Soviet Union. Nancy Reynolds, a writer for *Dance Magazine* wrote an article describing the reception of the tour within Russia: “Aside from a possible lack of

⁷⁹ Yates, “Russ Ballarina,” 2.

⁸⁰ Austin, *Natalia Makarova*, 54.

⁸¹ Aria, *Misha*, 88.

⁸² Zarhina, “Russian Invasion,” 76.

⁸³ David Abrahamion, “The Visible Hand: Money, Markets, and Media Evolution,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75.1: 18, accessed December 4, 2015.

<http://search.proquest.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/216926300?accountid=14556>

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

⁸⁵ Nancy Reynolds, “Cultural Revelation: in 1962 George Balanchine returned to the Soviet Union after an absence of thirty eight years, bringing his New York City Ballet and a handful of his works to audiences that had been cut off from Western culture for decades,” *Dance Magazine*, January, 1994. 88.

background with which to approach his work, they dared not show excessive enthusiasm for Balanchine—or anything else that was foreign—for this might imply that the analogous Soviet product was inferior.”⁸⁶ Although the international attention made it possible for American ballet to make its stamp globally, it was still considered a child who just now was beginning to sit at the big kids table. As A.H. Frank described in her book about ballet throughout the 20th century, America “is able to take considerable part in the healthy exchange of art and artists which is now taking place all over the world, and that, in doing so, she can offer ballet which bears the unmistakable stamp of the country of its origin.”⁸⁷ Even with international recognition, and American repertoire being performed by some of the oldest, most prestigious dance companies around the globe, America is still working to prove itself on an international stage. The process of earning international respect has followed the United States into the 21st century.

Today, American ballet still looks much like it did at the closing of the 20th century. Russian dancers are still widely respected among American dance companies and there is a greater abundance of Russian-trained dancers who now have the ability to come to the United States for dance opportunities.⁸⁸ In the present society, ballet dancers are being recognized more and more as role models and inspirations for the up and coming generation. For example, Misty Copland, the first African American ballet dancer to become a principle dancer for American Ballet Theater, has a contract with Under Armor alongside some of the most famous athletes of our time.⁸⁹ Accomplishments like this were made possible

by bringing the dance world into the spotlight during the Cold War, and providing it a place among popular culture. Frank described the American ballet technique as an “incorporation of certain American physical qualities of clean, cool, buoyant athleticism.”⁹⁰ These attributes resemble some of the same qualities looked for in athletes of highly recognized American sports culture. This helps American ballet compete, on some level, with other multi-billion dollar sports industries. None of this would be possible were it not for the contributions of Soviet defectors.

American ballet has been drastically affected by prominent Soviet defectors who came to America during the 20th century. The rigid Soviet system fashioned an environment that produced dancers that longed to expand their artistry, and eventually led to their defections. They came to a society that offered them the freedom they needed, but which lacked the means of producing the creativity required to mold a unique American ballet technique. It took both environments to create what is now known as American ballet, and Balanchine, Makarova, and Baryshnikov are largely responsible for it. Without these three artists, dance in America would not look the same way and would not hold the same respect and influence that it does today on a national and international level.

Even though American ballet is one art form that many Americans still look at as a boring show that the wealthy may attend on a Sunday afternoon, its history gives important insight into the culture of the Cold War. Not only does it illustrate the individual cultures of both the Soviet Union and the United States, but also how their cultures interacted with each other. The Soviet defectors represented a

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Franks, *A Decade of Endeavor*, 48.

⁸⁸ Zahrina, “Russian Invasion,” 76.

⁸⁹ Michael Cooper, “Misty Copland Is Promoted to Principal Dancer at American Ballet Theater,” *The New York Times*,

June 30, 2015. Accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/arts/dance/misty-copland-is-promoted-to-principal-dancer-at-american-ballet-theater.html? r=0>

⁹⁰ Frank, *A Decade of Endeavor*, 52.

discipline and structure which were both important qualities in the Soviet system. On the other hand, American dancers are seen as free and rebellious, which reflected the youth culture in America during the Cold War, and is seen in most of the American youth culture in the 20th century. The government of both nations greatly revealed the values of the individuals that are brought up under their wings. By looking at a specific group, such as ballet dancers, one can see the influence of their government and their upbringing through the art they produce.

America has always been known for taking the culture of other places and creating its own version. It is natural for a country that is relatively new and has so many unique heritages to practice this sort of cultural borrowing. Balanchine is an example of this because he took his Russian heritage and combined all of Russian technique with American cultural practices and created a new sort of ballet that is a mixture of both systems.⁹¹ Elizabeth Kendal explains that “dance is usually seen by historians (when it is noticed at all) as a decoration on the face of serious events. But a dancing human body can become, in a way that’s utterly mysterious, emblematic of the deepest forces stirring within any given historical moment.”⁹² In the case of this paper it shows that American ballet is in fact a reflection of the Cold War. It is a combination of two cultures who believed they had nothing in common and that one must prove they are better than the other. When in hindsight one can see that it took the combination of both cultures to bring a dance form that is technical, beautiful, and distinctive to America. The Cold War brought about many changes for people in both the Soviet Union and the United States, and fear and competition were often looked at as restricting

instead of inspiring. It is because of this that good things that developed as a result of the Cold War are overlooked. American ballet is just one example of a gift that came out of the Cold War, and makes one wonder if there are more cultural gems from the time period waiting to be explored by scholars that could generate a different cultural history than the one that is understood today.

⁹¹ Zarhina, “Russian Invasion,” 76.

⁹² Kendall, “A Doorway to Revolution,” 80.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

- Beard, Alison. "Lifes Work: An Interview with Mikhail Baryshnikov," *Harvard Business Review*, May, 2011. Accessed October 8, 2015. <https://hbr.org/2011/05/lifes-work-mikhail-baryshnikov>.
- Kolnik, Paul. "Baryshnikov Apollo." Photograph. Dance Heritage Coalition, accessed December 6, 2015. <http://www.danceheritage.org/baryshnikov.html>
- Makaroff, Dina. "Dying Swan." Photograph, Dance Media Digital. Dance Spirit Magazine, accessed December 6, 2015. <http://www.dancespirit.com/margarets-musings/natalia-makarova-kennedy-center-honoree/>
- Markarova, Natalia. *A Dance Autobiography*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1979.
- Nureyev, Rudolf. *Nureyev: An Autobiography with Pictures*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1963.
- Swope, Martha. "George Balanchine rehearsing with Violette Verdy." Photograph, TimePix, 2002. The George Balanchine Foundation, accessed December 6, 2015. <http://www.balanchine.org/balanchine/03/balanchinelectures.html>
- Volkov, Solomon. *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky: Interviews with George Balanchine*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985.
- Yates, Ronald. "Russ Ballerina Who Defected Meets Press." *Chicago Tribune*. March 16, 1971, accessed December 4, 2015. <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1971/03/16/page/2/article/russ-ballerina-who-defected-meets-press>

Secondary Sources

- Abrahamion, David. "The Visible Hand: Money, Markets, and Media Evolution." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75.1: 18.
- Aria, Barbara. *Misha: The Mikhail Baryshnikov Story*. New York: Saint Martins Press, 1989.
- Austin, Richard. *Natalia Makarova: Ballerina*. New York: Dance Horizons, 1978.
- Beaumont, Cyril W. *A Short History of Ballet*. London: Wyman & Sons, 1933.
- Bergman, Jay. "The Memoirs of Soviet Defectors: Are They a Reliable Source about the Soviet Union?" *Canadian Slavonic Papers/ Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 31, pgs 1-24. (1989).

Cooper, Michael. "Misty Copeland Is Promoted to Principal Dancer at American Ballet Theater." *The New York Times*, June 30, 2015. Accessed November 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/arts/dance/misty-copeland-is-promoted-to-principal-dancer-at-american-ballet-theater.html?_r=0

Ellison, Nancy. *The Ballet Book: Learning and Appreciating the Secrets of Dance*. New York: Universe, 2003.

Ezrahi, Christina. *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia*. Pittsburgh: university of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

Franks, A.H. *Ballet: A Decade of Endeavour*. New York: DaCapo Press, 1981.

Gottlieb, Robert. *George Balanchine*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

Kendall, Elizabeth. "A Doorway to Revolution: The Revelation in dance that was underway in 1900 mirrored the upheavals to come in this century," *Dance Magazine*, January, 1999. Accessed October 8, 2015. <http://www.dancemagazine.com/>

McDonagh, Don. *George Balanchine*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.

McDaniel, Cadra Peterson. *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015.

Reynolds, Nancy. "Cultural Revelation: in 1962 George Balanchine returned to the Soviet Union after an absence of thirty eight years, bringing his New York City Ballet and a handful of his works to audiences that had been cut off from Western culture for decades." *Dance Magazine*, January, 1994. Accessed October 4, 2015. <http://www.dancemagazine.com/>

Zarhina, Regina. "Russian Invasion: The Third World," *Dance Magazine*, January, 1998. Accessed October 8, 2015. <http://www.dancemagazine.com/>