**The World of Art in the Russian World: Post-Soviet Rewritings of Russian Ballet**

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*Abstract:* This chapter explores how two ballets, *Swan Lake* and *The Rite of Spring*, have figured in representations of Russia – whether in the Imperial, Soviet, or Post-Soviet contexts. Although definitions of what counts as aesthetically desirable have shifted considerably since the days of the Romanov dynasty, ballet's propagandistic role in Russian nationalisms (plural) is far more complex than current dance scholarship tends to represent it as being. Abroad, especially in Anglo-American readings, representations of Russian ballet still propagate Orientalism, patriarchal genealogies, and Cold War era prejudice.

*Keywords:* nationalism, imperialism, Russian ballet, *Swan Lake*, *The Rite of Spring*, Eurasianism

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## In Lieu of an Introduction

I am supposed to be writing of how, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the long history of ballet in Russia got rewritten into an ethnonationalist and patriarchal narrative – one that, more recently, has engulfed émigré culture as part of a neo-pan-Slavist or Eurasianist rhetoric about 'the Russian world'.[1] But it is 6 January 2022 and I cannot reach my supervisee in Kazakhstan because their internet has been taken down. There are riots in the Soviet-era capital Almaty as bitcoin miners expulsed from China have driven up energy prices. Russia is sending in blue-beret paratroopers as 'peacekeepers', and I hear speculation of the return of the ousted dictator Nazarbayev. This coming autumn term, I am supposed to be giving a masterclass in the new capital, Nur-Sultan, named after Nazarbayev. It is a cyberpunk dystopia straight out of the 1990s with mad dictators in the mix.

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23 January 2022. My supervisee is alive and well and her family is safe, but shocked. We continue our plans for her disputation and my visit. She writes that she hears Europe is 'getting real bad again'. I wonder if she means the pandemic or the reports of Russian troop mobilization in Karelia, just across the border of Finland. My online searches for this chapter bring up disturbing things.

…

24 February 2022. In a move similar to the 2014 Crimea crisis that figures in my chapter draft, Putin 'recognized' the Donbas separatists three days ago, and now Russian

troops have crossed the border into Ukraine. This feels like the USSR's Mainila false flag operation, the casus belli for the Winter War against Finland in 1939.

I have a cross-stitch image of the castle of Vyborg under my table. Behind it, my grandfather Eino wrote that he took it out of a burning house in Neitsytniemi, 12 March 1940. I remember him telling of how his commanding officer threatened him with a court martial for looting, to which he responded that he doubted the army would shoot a soldier for a piece of craft that was going to burn anyway.

Everything in that story is too neat. 12 March 1940 was the day of the Moscow peace treaty, the day before the Winter War finally ended and Finland conceded most of Karelia, including Vyborg, its fourth largest city, to the USSR. Ten days later, my father was born. In 1941, grandfather would again be on the front against the overwhelming odds of Soviet troops, and his son would not recognize him when he returned in 1944.

For as long as I can remember, that picture hung on my grandfather's wall. Despite disagreeing with him on just about everything, my father kept it and hung it on his wall when grandfather passed. Despite disagreeing with my father on just about everything, I kept it when he passed in turn in 2018. It is not on my wall, because as my partner put it: 'You have a complicated relationship with that one'.

In its upper right-hand corner, someone – probably grandfather Eino – has stuck a small commemorative brass pin for the pre-war 1939 fortification works in Karelia. Later known as the Mannerheim Line, these fortifications were commissioned by the extreme-right imperialist organization Akateeminen Karjala-seura – the victors of the Civil War, upper-class people that my grandfather despised. A factory worker in Tampere, he was likely hired as physical labour. How many of the Russian troops in Ukraine are *vatniks* and how many would leave if not for the fear of being shot as a deserter?[2] All news stories are too neat.

…

4 March 2022. I wake up to news that the Russian invaders have tried to set fire to the largest nuclear power plant in Europe. I am transported to another morning in 1986, when my mom rushed me to help her bring in the laundry as it started to rain. A few days later, the local chaplain, Juhani, who was teaching me computing (on my still new C64), came over with a Geiger counter, saying he could detect the items we had retrieved from the rain. A very concrete lesson about radioactivity I am desperately hoping will not be repeated.

On a cognitive level, as a former army brat, I know the strategic value of cutting off power supplies from the enemy. I understand that, as the rouble is plummeting, Putin seeks to extort a Europe dependent on Russian energy. But on a deeply emotional level all I can think about is how, once again, Ukrainian firefighters are halting a catastrophe that could endanger all of Europe. Over here, pharmacies are running out of iodine tablets. Trains from Russia are so full that tickets are only sold to Finnish and Russian citizens. Black market prices are skyrocketing.

A Russian friend told an old Soviet joke to lighten the mood:

> A man is going through every newspaper in the kiosk. The attendant asks him what he is looking for. 'I am looking for an obituary', the man responds. 'But obituaries are at the back of the papers', the attendant informs him. The man looks at him and says, 'The one I am looking for will be on the front page'.

I am waiting for *Swan Lake*.

## Waiting for *Swan Lake*

In 1991, during the attempted coup d'état designed to oust the newly-minted President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Mikhail Gorbachev, official television channels in the USSR broadcast only reruns of *Swan Lake*. This was a reprisal of earlier moments of crisis in Soviet leadership – looped broadcasts of *Swan Lake* had figured in Soviet television in the aftermath of the deaths of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, Yuri Andropov in 1984, and Konstantin Chernenko in 1985 (Sporton 2008: 382; Ross 2015: 26-7). So linked is this ballet with political turmoil that Alexander Kliment and Willis Sparks (2016) staged their 25th anniversary discussion of the 1991 coup attempt as interrupting a broadcast of *Swan Lake*. More recently, in 2015, when Vladimir Putin was absent from the public eye for over a fortnight, a Ukrainian website emerged with a ticking clock over a looped video of *Swan Lake*. Increasingly, critics of the Russian leader have also referred to hopes of democracy in Russia as 'waiting for *Swan Lake*' (Costa-Kostritsky 2018; Schonbek 2015). When the last independently run television channel in Russia, Dozhd (TVRain.ru), was shut down as 'a foreign agent' for reporting on the war in Ukraine, the staff walked out in one final YouTube broadcast on 3 March 2022. As their last words, one of the channel's founders, Nataliya Sindeyeva, declared 'no to war', and the broadcast continued with a rerun of *Swan Lake* (see Mellor 2022; Gessen 2022).

Why *Swan Lake*? This specific ballet has a long history as the favourite of those in power – it had been Stalin's favourite ballet – and consequently, its history has been subject to as many rewritings as the choreography itself. From its 'Russification' after the death of Marius Petipa to Cold War disputes about various 'original' versions to the uses of the work in political protests, *Swan Lake* occupies a rather unique position in the history of the art form. It is simultaneously a 'classic' rigorously guarded against change and infinitely malleable and open to re-interpretations. The plot revolves around prince Siegfried who falls in love with a princess, Odette, who has been enchanted into a swan by an evil sorcerer. The prince swears his devotion to Odette and promises to marry her to set her free from the curse. The sorcerer deceives Siegfried, whose inadvertent betrayal dooms Odette. Versions differ as to whether the lovers are triumphant over the sorcerer or only united in death, and thus whether *Swan Lake* is a tragedy or not. Several Soviet versions opted for the tale of lovers triumphant, a change often denigrated by scholars from the so-called First World as irreconcilable with the music, as 'banal' or as a purely political misinterpretation of the 'original' ballet arising from a Soviet distaste for tragedy (Sporton 2013: 91, 91n5; Ezrahi 2012: 163, 272; c.f. Souritz 1990). Yet the formalist, aesthetic and political explanations all effectively miss the mark: that a fairy-tale about princesses and princes and sorcerers was one of the most popular works under communism speaks to how the longevity of a ballet often has little to do with any kind of stability of form, let alone a work's inherent superiority as a cultural artefact.[3]

How *Swan Lake* became a quintessentially Russian ballet is anything but self-evident.

Its plot is not particularly *Russian*, as in Russian folk tales magical birds are rarely swans, and are usually there to test the hero/heroine.[4] *Swan Lake* was explicitly set in Germany – possibly because Julius Reisinger, the original choreographer, was Bohemian – and many of the plot elements echo Wagnerian themes. Dance history tends to skip from Reisinger directly to Marius Petipa's 1895 version, but Reisinger's choreography had already been reworked in 1882 by Josef Hansen, and in 1894, Lev Ivanov re-choreographed the second tableau for a concert performance starring Pierina Legnani and Pavel Gerdt (Wiley 1985: 242-8; Wiley [1997] 2007: 170-83). As Petipa's version postdates all of these, it was likely an amalgam – certainly, chunks of Tchaikovsky's score got replaced in the process, various pas were dropped, added or moved, and the libretto rewritten.[5] At the time, neither 'authorship' nor 'work' were understood in ballet in ways that later generations have imposed on 'Petipa's ballets'. Instead, as Petipa himself argued, the ballet master's job was to keep reviving and changing their compositions, so that each star dancer could be presented to their advantage, with the latest inventions in special effects and costume design incorporated into the staging (Wiley 1985: 2). Change was imperative because the audience of the Imperial companies was overwhelmingly the same from one performance to the next: four out of five performances at the Mariinsky were by subscription only (Frame 2000: 66-70).

*Swan Lake* was also not a 'classic' or even a 'classical ballet' – as Beth Genné (2000) has shown, these terms postdate the First World War. The word 'classical' signified the dancing style of the principal, almost exclusively aristocratic characters; its opposite was 'character dance'. Around 1900, Aleksandr Gorsky, a dancer and a teacher of dance notation and theory of dancing in St. Petersburg and the new ballet master and director of the ballet company of the Bolshoi in Moscow, began experimenting with a new style, which was soon known as 'new ballet' – in opposition to the 'old ballet' or 'academic ballet' of Petipa. Gorsky mixed classical and character dance elements, importing principles of historical and ethnic stage design and realistic acting and group movements from the Krotkov/Mamontov Private Opera (1885–1904) and the Moscow Arts Theatre (est. 1898) companies.[6] Gorsky not only created new works but also reworked many old ballets, including a 1901 *Swan Lake* that caused a veritable storm in a teacup (Souritz 1990: 116, 132; Krasovskava 1971).

Gorsky's new ballet was, in a sense, a belated reaction to the broad social changes in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century. Whereas other Russian arts turned to nationalist topics or commented on socio-political issues in the wake of Alexander II's reforms in the 1860s – the most notable of which was the abolition of serfdom in 1861 that freed over a third of the empire's population – ballet shied away from contemporary topics. While Russian populists went in search of the Russian 'soul' in folk tales or the arts and crafts of peasants, inspiring both painters and musicians to create national romantic works that are still referred to as the 'Golden Age' of Russian arts (Salmond 1996), the ballet companies of the Imperial Theatres transformed fairy tales into propaganda for the empire.[7]

During the politically repressive rule of Alexander III, ballet flourished across the Russian empire. The Imperial Theatres may have held a theatre monopoly in the two capitals until 1882, but permanent ballet companies existed in larger provincial cities and some, like the Warsaw Wielki Theatre, came with adjoining schools. Various music halls, circuses or pleasure gardens – and, later, peoples' houses (*narodnyi dom*, a system established in 1882) – all performed ballet, often in conjunction with operatic or dramatic episodes, folk (or

character) dances, circus acts, acrobatics, skits or songs (Swift 2002: 136). Lines between genres were often flexible, and 'ballet' served as a general term for almost any staged dance. Whereas touring companies relied on a repertory of short divertissements, extracts of longer ballets or one-act pieces with even simpler dramatic plots, commercial theatres also performed evening-long ballets as well as operas and operettas with ballet scenes. Most of the artists of the Imperial Theatres performed on popular stages during the long closures between seasons and during Orthodox holidays, because popularity influenced their advancement in the ranks of the Imperial companies (McReynolds 2003). Commercial theatres like the Arkadia in St. Petersburg also brought many foreign stars to Russia, including 'The Divine' Virginia Zucchi. Yet this mainstream of ballet has been categorically left out of dance history, a silencing that has less to do with any artistic qualities of works like *Swan Lake* and far more with a company that popularized the new ballet outside of Russia – the Ballets Russes (1909–1929).

**The Ballets Russes and the Russification of Ballet History**

The scion of a merchant family recently ennobled and more recently bankrupt, Sergei Diaghilev became famous as an editor of a novel kind of arts magazine, *Mir iskusstva* (*World of Art*, 1889–1905). The magazine folded in the wake of the disastrous war its main sponsor, emperor Nicholas II, waged against Japan and the ensuing 1905 Revolution that brought about the first inklings of constitutional democracy in Russia. Amidst the rioting and bloodshed, Diaghilev curated an exhibition of portraits of the Romanov dynasty, which left little doubt as to his political allegiance. With the blessing of his superiors at the Ministry of Court and additional financing from wealthy merchants, Diaghilev set out as an impresario of Russian painting (1906), music (1907), opera (1908) and finally opera and ballet (1909) in Paris. In 1911, after bankruptcy and scandal, Diaghilev founded a private ballet company, the Ballets Russes, which he directed until his death in 1929.

Like other touring ballet companies, the Ballets Russes built a variable repertory out of short works, including both old and new ballets.[8] At first, Diaghilev collaborated mostly with his *Mir iskusstva* circle of artists, and the ballets of the 1909 season reflected a particularly Russian understanding of the history of the art form, replacing the court of Versailles with that of Peterhof, the Arabian Nights with the wild Polovtsy tribes of the Caucasus. The season included both new ballets and excerpts of old ones – the obligatory Orientalist spectacle *Cléopâtre* was based on an earlier Petipa choreography, whereas *Le Festin*, a series of short divertissements, was set in a Slavophile fantasy of a Muscovite court (Scholl 1994: 61-6). The pre-war seasons of the company are still mythologized as collaborative 'total works of art', unprecedented and unrelated to anything the foreign critics had previously seen. For Russian critics, however, there was little novelty in the Ballets Russes, as even the principal ballet master for the pre-war seasons, Mikhail Fokine, was a recent convert to the new ballet.[9] Worse, the French seemed incapable of analysing dancing or choreographic composition, only reviewed novelties and focused on the music and visual aspects of the spectacles, with a smattering of Orientalizing rhetoric that Russian critics found

insulting (see Järvinen 2008). Because of the emphasis on drama over dance in Fokine's short pieces, the Ballets Russes was accused of ruining the generation of virtuosic young dancers who starred in these works – most notably Vaslav Nijinsky, who was spectacularly dismissed from the Mariinsky company for insubordination in 1911 (Wiley [1979] 1980; Järvinen 2014: 219-23).

Given these negative views at home, Diaghilev's coterie quickly began to frame themselves as revolutionaries misunderstood in the stifling political environment of Russia – unwittingly encouraging precisely the stereotypical view of Russia as not-quite-Europe and of Russians as Orientals governed by their violent passions which Russian critics found so insulting.[10] For the Diaghilev enterprise to be 'revolutionary' and 'vanguard', all other ballet had to have been in a state of lamentable decline – in France as well as in Russia. Fortunately, in France, the leading choreographers of the day were women – Louise Stichel at the Paris Opéra and Madame Mariquita for the Comédie Française, a company generally considered far superior to that of the Opéra (Gutsche-Miller 2015; Malandain and Marquié 2014). In contrast, Diaghilev specifically promoted male dancers, and in twenty years only hired one woman choreographer, Bronislava Nijinska – the sister of his former lover and first figurehead of the Ballets Russes, Nijinsky. The more one delves into sources beyond the Ballets Russes, the more the 'rescue' this company provided seems like a re-establishment of patriarchy after the era of 'difficult' women like Mariquita and Stichel.[11]

After the First World War and the very real revolution of 1917 in Russia, the Ballets Russes changed tack. No longer 'revolutionaries in art', in 1921, Diaghilev nearly bankrupted himself by mounting a version of *The Sleeping Beauty* (under the title *Aurora's Wedding*, choreographed by Nijinska) – a work that in 1910, he had sneered at as a 'féerie Franco-Italienne' (Diaghilev 1911). This appeased émigré proponents of the old ballet, notably Andrei Levinson, causing a kind of fusion of all critical opinion about the company which was now represented as the true heir of the Imperial companies outside of Russia, the last vestige of aristocratic world order and the saviour of ballet from an era of decline. Notably, the decline myth directly served the interests of the Paris Opéra by erasing its competitors from history.

By Diaghilev's death in 1929, ballet had been thoroughly Russified. The director of the Opéra, Jacques Rouché, went in search of a Russian replacement to the 'troublesome' Stichel soon after Diaghilev's 1910 season, and tried hiring Nijinsky in 1914 when the choreographer broke with his erstwhile lover. In 1930, another Diaghilev star, Serge Lifar, finally made this dream a reality (Rouché 1952: 95; Garafola [1989] 1992: 194-5). Across the channel, two former Diaghilev dancers, Marie Rambert and Ninette de Valois, founded important new companies that became the Ballet Rambert and the Royal Ballet. They also helped transform old ballet into 'classical ballet', with generous help from émigré critics like Diaghilev's staunchest Russian supporter Valerian Svetlov (Genné 2000; Järvinen 2014: 192). In the United States, another Diaghilev protégé, George Balanchine, joined forces with Lincoln Kirstein to propagate a 'neoclassicism' derivative of the Imperial Russian ballet, again with help from former subjects of the Russian empire like Ivan Narodny.[12] In all of these discourses, the legacy of Diaghilev's troupe functioned as a vehicle for separating the 'vanguard' ways of understanding ballet ('the West') from the Imperial Russian and Soviet ballet ('the East'), represented as stuck in the past and incapable of the 'abstraction' and

'modern' sentiments required of true art. Western versions of 'classics' like *Swan Lake* became the 'authentic' versions.

After 1917, the new Communist Russian leaders appropriated the companies and repertories of the old Imperial Theatres as a new people's art form. The first People's Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, was focal in ensuring this seemingly contradictory embrace of the court art form in the Soviet Union (Frame 2000: 154–71; Souritz 1990, 42–50). Despite its aristocratic roots, the Imperial ballet was the sole option for a Soviet ballet, given that the alternative was the commercial ballet of variety stages, circuses and touring companies. This had been the most popular, accessible form of ballet in Imperial Russia, but also very much a *capitalist* enterprise, and as such, far too counterrevolutionary for the Communist Party. Because the strict hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the Imperial Theatres had long troubled both dancers and dance fans, many young dancers were enthusiastic about the post-revolutionary reorganization of the theatres around workers' committees, which gave performers more say in the productions previously controlled by generals of the Imperial Civil Service. The corps de ballet dancers – the 'working classes' of ballet – had also generally supported the new ballet, because it unravelled the divisions between 'classical' and 'character' parts or 'danced' and 'mimed' roles that favoured dancers with strong academic dance technique – or the right connections. Its emphasis on the ensemble and on narrative also suited Communist ideology. The new ballet developed into Soviet *drambalet*, emphasizing acting over academic dance technique.

Amidst the material shortages and raging Civil War, the overhaul of the old system provided hope for young dancers and prospective ballet masters. In the 1930s, much of this energy was curtailed with the Stalinist crackdown on modernism and the instigation of socialist realist doctrines. Ballet's stars became privileged heroes of the Soviet Union with access to luxury items and hard currency. As in any dictatorship, however, such visibility brought danger, and many a dancer found themselves if not in prison at least petitioning for the lives of their loved ones. As with the Imperial Theatres, ideology dictated what could be shown on stage and repertory choices were made by people with little understanding of the art form. Even so, it is important to remember that ballet in the USSR was no more a monolith than ballet in Imperial Russia had been.

As both entrepreneurial and émigré art, the Ballets Russes – a company that had never performed in Russia – was reduced to a side note in Soviet ballet histories.[13] Vera Krasovskaia's monumental *Russian Ballet at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (1971), which incorporates many French and English language sources on the Ballets Russes, heralded a rehabilitation that would later extend to Diaghilev and the artists of the *Mir iskusstva* group. In 1974, Krasovskaia also published a semi-fictional biography of Nijinsky which openly discusses his homosexuality. Abroad, Mary Swift's 1969 *The Art of the Dance in the U.S.S.R* had already emphasized how differences in aesthetic preference led to conflicts within the state theatres of the USSR; how ballet associated itself with the Soviet avantgarde in the 1920s and 1930s, and with demands of socialist realism during Stalinism; and how contacts abroad during the Khrushchev Thaw further influenced the Soviet discourse. This critical discourse demonstrated that the histories of ballet were more intertwined and its aesthetics more complex than the Cold War dichotomy posited (Hamm 2009; Croft 2015).

In contrast, formalist scholars still tend to reproduce Cold War values, searching for

evidence of neoclassicism à la Balanchine in select Soviet ballets (Ezhrahi 2012; Ross 2015; Morrison 2016). Such simplistic readings have strengthened Russian reluctance to learn from foreign dance scholars, exacerbating the difficulties critical dance scholars have encountered when trying to publish on, for example, feminist topics or on colonialism within Russia or the Soviet Union. The kind of 'Russian ballet' praised in dance publications, in other words, always has more to do with the political ideology of the authors than with the complex, shifting and often contradictory reality of any single ballet company, let alone the art form in a country with as turbulent a history as Russia. Today, emphasizing these nuanced legacies is more important than ever, as the neo-imperialist politics of the Putin regime has also brought ballet into its fold.

**Merging the Old and the New**

Along with the work of other exiled citizens of the Russian empire, Diaghilev's legacy has been appropriated by the neo-imperialist ideology of 'the Russian world', 'an imagined diasporic community united by ideals of culture and language' (Anisimova 2018). As a political credo, the Russian world really emerged in 2007 in the form of a charitable foundation supported by President Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Orthodox Church, purportedly for re-connecting diasporic Russians and former Soviet citizens under Moscow's leadership (Zevelev 2016; Kotkina 2017). How an international art form like ballet and the Ballets Russes in particular are positioned in this ideology reveal a lot about its aims.

For one, the Ballets Russes is represented as synonymous with Mikhail Fokine's 'modernist' choreographies and the so-called Silver Age in Russian art. Yet these works are always represented in ways that elide their reformist relationship to the 'old ballets' of Petipa, the other ballet choreographer always evoked in these contexts. A very prominent example of this fusion was the short film on the Cyrillic alphabet that opened the Winter Olympics in Sochi ('Sochi Olympics Alphabet Opening Ceremony' 2014). Emulating the *ABC-book* (1904) by Aleksandr Benois, best known for his designs of *Petrouchka* (1911) for the Ballets Russes company, the film included exactly one reference to dance: the letter p (r) stood for 'Russkii balet Diaghilego' (Diaghilev's Russian Ballet). The image projected of this company, however, was of the profiles of two rows of identical ballerinas in short, white tutus – an image far more *Swan Lake* than *Les Sylphides*, Petipa rather than Fokine (Anisimova 2018; Järvinen 2020b). But the dedication of the entirety of Russian ballet to an émigré company that never performed in Russia indicated more than simply a change in the appreciation of the Ballets Russes style. As Irina Anisimova (2018) has noted, in the same film, the letter и (i) stood for *imperiia* (empire), accompanied with a picture of Peter I the Great, a ruler Vladimir Putin has claimed to emulate (Roth 2022). As if putting to practice the message of the film, before the Olympics had even finished, Putin had ordered the annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine, where the Euromaidan protests had ousted the pro-Russian government on 22 February 2014. The success of the campaign enabled further imperialist aspirations eerily reminiscent of pan-Slavism, including the current war in Ukraine.

Moreover, in marked contrast to Soviet-era emphasis on multiculturalism, the Sochi film follows a suitably blond and blue-eyed girl who, in the end, stands with five other white children in T-shirts that spell 'Rossiia'. This all-white Russia exemplifies the racism and xenophobia underlying post-Soviet Russian nationalisms (Law and Zakharov 2019). Yet its roots lie in the unmarked white privilege within the international communist movement, masked by egalitarian rhetoric and often sincere efforts at anti-colonialism.[14] In ballet, this complicated legacy of racism and nationalism shows in the emphasis on the 'authenticity' of Soviet-era character dances, regardless of how those dances represent ethnicity onstage, as well as in the insistence on 'preserving' brownface and blackface characters in Petipa's or Fokine's ballets.[15]

Yet the one ballet that scholars have associated with the most virulent form of Russian neo-imperialism and Eurasianism – a work, moreover, that could represent the ideological underpinnings of the Russian world – has met with resounding silence. I refer, of course, to *The Rite of Spring* (1913), a ballet for the Ballets Russes company by Vaslav Nijinsky to the music of Igor Stravinsky, with sets and costumes by Nikolai Roerich, which had a libretto harking back to previous representations of the 'origin' of Russian empire in present-day Ukraine.

## Eurasianism, Scythianism, Modernism: The Many Contexts of *The Rite of Spring*

In all Russian nationalisms, any definition of 'a nation' as 'a people' (*narod*) with shared culture and history has always clashed with the concrete diversity of cultures, histories and languages within the geographic area deemed Russia proper. Nationalism relies on the idea of a unified land inhabited by people of shared ethnic and cultural background. Instead, citizens of the Russian empire whose first language was not Russian or who were not Orthodox or even Christian in faith had lived on the banks of the Moskva and the Neva for as long as those identifying themselves as Russians had. This tension at the core of the imagined community, and resultant drive to establish the origins of Russia in a mythological state of Rus', are still at the heart of Russian nationalisms.

The origin stories of Russia in the ancient Rus (still called *Kievan Rus'* in Russia) tell of Finnic and Slavic peoples uniting under Norse rulers, the Rurikid dynasty, who converted to Christianity in what is now Ukraine.[16] With the rise of Russian imperialism in the nineteenth century, staging this 'pagan Rus' as the mythical national origin of the (ethnically) Russian people became popular in Russian opera – Verstovsky's *Askold's Grave* premiered in Moscow in 1835 and in St. Petersburg in 1841; Serov's *Rogneda* followed in 1865; and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mlada* in 1892. Perhaps because pagan Russians dancing ballet was not very credible, ballet versions of these stories such as Petipa's *Mlada* (1879) were less than successful.[17] However, it was only a matter of time before the Ballets Russes would also tackle the origin stories of Russia, and in many ways, the right man for the job was the designer of the 1913 production of *The Rite of Spring*, Nikolai Roerich, who believed himself a descendant of the mythical Rurik (Andreyev 2014: 1-4, 36, 92-3).

In 1910–1912, when *The Rite of Spring* was being planned, extant representations of

pagan Russians onstage had generally focused on stories of heroism and love, triumphs over great obstacles that are tied to the birth of the Russian Orthodox church: *Rogneda* ends with a chorus praising prince Vladimir's conversion, an event that *Askold's Grave* also alludes to; in both ballet and opera Yaromir and Mlada are united in heaven; all three operas and the ballet depict the foiling of plots of vengeful pagans or their deities. In contrast, *The Rite of Spring*, subtitled *Pictures of Pagan Russia*, was an episodic composition with no heroes or heroines, no clear narrative and a second act that culminated in the seemingly senseless sacrifice of a young woman. Worse, Nijinsky's choreography confused foreign spectators by doing away with conventional stage pictures (*tableaux*) suggested in the libretto and title, and after a tumultuous reception, the work was only performed nine times over the summer of 1913 – to packed auditoriums, of course.

In Russia, critics who had seen *The Rite of Spring* in Paris found it an interesting – if somewhat flawed – attempt at a truly Russian ballet. Unlike the foreign spectators confusing 'pagan Russia' with the Stone Age, Russian critics recognised that the setting and costumes followed earlier conventions of representing ancient Rus.[18] In its extreme stylisation of gesture, Nijinsky's choreography recalled the recently renovated icon paintings and popular woodcuts – imagery concurrently reinterpreted by Russian modernist painters. Stravinsky's music drew from folk songs as well as from Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Hostile reactions from French critics were merely proof positive that Russian art was now in advance of that of Europe. People as diverse in political opinion as the former Director of the Imperial Theatres, Prince Sergei Volkonsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, soon to become a Soviet politruk under Lenin, wrote long accolades praising the way the choreography and music came together to evoke a deep sense of Russianness. Even Andrei Levinson, who disliked everything about the new ballet, was intrigued, whereas poor Valerian Svetlov, a fan of Fokine's compositions, bravely tried to find something worth praising in the novelty (Järvinen 2021).

In 1914, Diaghilev's decision to dismiss Nijinsky and drop his choreographies from the repertory was generally viewed as cowardice. After the World War, and with the choreographer institutionalized as mentally ill, the music was resurrected as standalone concert piece and Stravinsky seized the opportunity to rewrite the history of his most famous composition. Consequently, the reputation of *The Rite of Spring* still rests almost entirely on later fictions and select opinions of foreign critics – predominantly ones who disliked Nijinsky's choreography and/or framed their praise in outright racist terms.[19] After the 1917 Russian revolutions and the foundation of the USSR, Diaghilev's enterprise became the politically correct heir to the Imperial Theatres outside of Russia and focal to imperial nostalgia.

For the past thirty years, the influential Stravinsky scholar Richard Taruskin has advocated the idea that *The Rite of Spring* was designed to represent a 'Scythian' or 'Turanian' view of Russian history (Taruskin 1996: 851–6, 1126–36; Garafola 2017). Scythianism was a cultural movement in Imperial Russia that relied on racist pseudoscience to reposition the Mongol invasion of Russia as having introduced 'Asiatic' values that enabled the emergence of Russian state, autocracy and imperial conquest. Whereas Taruskin presents this movement as a harmless artistic innovation, 'coined around 1916 in connection with a pair of clamorous poetic miscellanies' (1996: 856), Marianne Laruelle has rightly

called Scythianism 'an even more virulent Russian nationalism than that of the Slavophiles' (2007: 28–9). Similarly, Taruskin flirts with Turanism, a form of pseudoscientific racism seeking to counter pan-Germanism by uniting heterogenous peoples on the edges of the Russian empire through a fictional linguistic and ethnic origin in the Turanian basin of Central Asia. An effort to turn the tables on scientific racists emphasizing 'Aryan' or 'Nordic' whiteness, Turanists included anyone not Aryan, Semitic or Chinese in Eurasia as part of their movement – even the First Peoples of North America (Pursiainen 1999; Lieven 2000). After the collapse of the Russian empire, Turanism and Scythianism influenced the emergence of Eurasianism, a conservative, pro-autocratic and anti-Soviet nationalism, where Russia's Messianic task was to lead all of Europe and Asia to a brilliant future defined in mystical, even occultist terms (Maiorova 2015; Glebov 2015).

Like many émigrés, Stravinsky seems to have been drawn to Eurasianism in the 1920s, which may also have affected how he positioned *The Rite of Spring* in his reminiscences. Although Roerich's Baltic family background may have made Turanism particularly appealing to him, neither Roerich nor his wife ever articulated support of Eurasianism – unlike how Taruskin presents it, Roerich's references to Russia's Asiatic heritage did not align him with Scythianism, Turanism or Eurasianism any more than his references to 'communism' would have made him an advocate of the USSR.[20] Originally, Eurasianism resisted ethnic – both cultural and biological – definitions of Russia and instead portrayed Russia as a multi-ethnic synthesis of the best of both Europe and Asia. In practice, this ensured its perpetuation in Soviet Russia and subsequent reformulation into the neo-imperialist ideology of Aleksandr Dugin, today (Laruelle 2007).

Dugin, nicknamed 'Putin's philosopher', has long sought to revise Russian history in an outstandingly contrafactual manner. His new Eurasianism considers the USSR as an empire to be restored, often in ways that conflate the USSR with the former Russian empire. It has retained three tenets from the 1920s: nostalgia for a 'greater' past, glorification of autocratic rule – including figures like Stalin or Nicholas II of Russia, canonised as a saint of the Orthodox church in 2000 – and an emphasis on the illogical, irrational and Messianic 'destiny' of Russia familiar from nineteenth-century Russian nationalisms. Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (2017) have stressed that this new Eurasianism, *evraziistvo*, is deliberately nebulous, enabling a conflation of 'nation' and 'empire' where racism and implicit whiteness go unmarked. Marlène Laruelle and Igor Torbakov have similarly stressed that Eurasianism both is and is not *nationalism* because it opposes both civic and ethnocentric definitions of post-Soviet Russia, thus effectively strengthening the idea of the Russian Federation as a multi-ethnic state while implicitly prioritizing Russian ethnicity[21] as foundational to this state (Torbakov 2017; Laruelle 2007).

Given that *The Rite of Spring* is an iconic symbol of modernism and its libretto at least flirts with ideas of Russian nationalism, why has the work not figured as an example of the Russian world in contemporary discourses? The Hodson 'reconstruction' was performed by the Mariinsky company in 2003 and re-rehearsed for the centennial of the Nijinsky original in 2013, but public discussion on – let alone critical engagement with – these performances was scarce.[22] In part, this is because Hodson's work is very much an American creation, a speculative hodgepodge lacking all the qualities that made the 1913 production a nationalist – or aesthetically interesting – spectacle. But in part, it is due to how the imagined

Russia onstage has adopted the German fairy-tale swans as more of a national icon than *The Rite of Spring*, a work that is predominantly understood as primitivism, as something universal rather than as specifically Russian.

Russian ethnonationalist discourse tends to represent the failures of both the tsars of old and of the USSR as due to nefarious 'cosmopolitan elites' familiar from conspiracy theories. As an international art form favoured by said elites, ballet does not easily align with such discourse – but neither did it align with Communism, under which the art form still thrived. But with the predominance of foreign opinions on all representations of *The Rite of Spring*, including the so-called reconstruction, the nationalist sentiment of the Russian spectators of 1913 cannot be easily referenced – something that a work without a continuous repertory presence would need to have to suit the nationalist agenda. Moreover, *The Rite of Spring* is also associated with both the madness of its choreographer and the terrors of war, a combination that is anything but a call-to-arms for nationalists, even ones embracing of the irrational in the form of the Russian soul.[23]

For Eurasianists, Russian ballet exemplifies the perfect fusion of Europe and Asia – whether through the Orientalist spectacles that reemphasize Russian whiteness via crude stereotypes of the Other or through the whiteness of 'classics' like *Swan Lake* associated with the past glories of the Russian empire. Ballet's heteronormative plots, gendered dance technique, nostalgic intragenerational embrace of 'the classics' and hierarchy of stardom are all ideologically conservative, and as under Alexander III, ballet is doing just fine in Putin's Russia. Emulating the tsars of old, Putin has even built a private theatre on his 'dacha' where his favourite ballet dancers regularly perform, and in March 2022, he suggested a fusion of the Mariinsky and Bolshoy theatres in the manner of the Imperial Theatres, to be led by his close friend, the conductor Valery Gergiev (Kaufman 2022; Parhomovska 2023).

**Conclusions: Rethinking Swans and Rites**

8 October 2022. The Bolshoy theatre just fired ten dancers for misrepresenting the company during a visit to another former Imperial Russian colony/Soviet republic, Uzbekistan ('10 Bolshoi Dancers Suspended for Tashkent Performance' 2022; Ballet Symphonie 2022). It is the day after Vladimir Putin's birthday, and I am in New York, as my travel to the city no longer called Nur-Sultan is out of the question as long as the war in Ukraine makes travel there this complicated.[24] I am still waiting for *Swan Lake*, but also thinking about whether this work – or 'Russian ballet' more generally – might have some *other* meaning in the 2020s.

…

In 2021, Ilmira Bagautdinova danced *Swan Lake* on the ice of Batareinaya Bay near St. Petersburg in ecological protest against the planned construction of a grain silo. The reasoning she offered for dancing this work was that the bay was known for its swans, and it was one of the few remaining seashores open to ordinary people like her for rest and relaxation ('Russian ballerina performs Swan Lake on ice to save bay' 2021). That a fairy-tale ballet about princes and swan-princesses created for the leisure classes of Imperial Russia

and a favourite of a Soviet dictator can be made to represent the rights of ordinary citizens to nature and wildlife threatened by corporate interests reveals the power of art to retain its significance through change.

But as if to illustrate that the plot of *Swan Lake* is also about deception, late in 2022, a company presenting itself as 'Ukrainian National Ballet at Odessa' began touring Europe with a production of this ballet. In February 2023, when it was scheduled to perform in Ireland, the Ukrainian embassy in Ireland called the company impostors, and in March, the Odessa National Opera and Ballet Theatre published an official statement denying it had anything to do with this touring company (McGreevy 2023; Odessa National Opera and Ballet Theatre 2023). It is outrageous that a private company could benefit from the public sympathy for Ukraine in Europe in this manner, but worse that European cultural institutions did not bother to check the credentials of the company before enabling its scam. I am reminded of how, from 1910 to the early 1960s, many 'Russian Ballets' borrowed their fame from the Imperial Theatres and Diaghilev's company.

The ultra-conservative nature of the current rewriting of Russian ballet in the service of Putin's war can be illustrated in the 2019 Women's Day imagery of the recruitment office of the Russian army (Reevell 2019; 'Why Russian women need to reclaim March 8' 2019). In contrast to Soviet emphasis on women as capable of serving in any profession, including the armed forces, these images contrast ballerinas in passive poses wearing long, white tutus with men in full combat gear holding automatic weapons and aggressively staring at the camera. These present-day sylphs represent the lamentable decline in women's equality in Russia, the emphasis on 'femininity' as fragility that has to be 'defended' by violent, toxic masculinity. The hierarchies of ballet companies, the strict gendering of the dance technique, the legacies of colonialism and patriarchal historiography that have erased ballet mistresses and contemporary topics alike from dance textbooks, all ease the alignment of this particular form with fascism and imperialism.

But what gets celebrated as ballet's 'vanguard' also often erases how the art form can engage with political protest. In addition to Bagautdinova's environmentalist performance and the many Russian uses of *Swan Lake* as political protest, over the past decade, this ballet has figured in a feminist, ecological protest against duck hunting in Tasmania in 2016 (Watt 2019); in an Amnesty International UK (2014) protest against Russia's anti-LGBTQ laws in London; in a demonstration against theatre closures during the pandemic in London (Young 2020); and in protest of the French government's austerity politics in Paris (Yushkova 2014). For all its focal role in narratives of modernism in ballet, and its legacy of inspiring hundreds of works set to the same score, *The Rite of Spring* has no such presence. Rather than explaining this as an echo of the original nationalist credo of the work, I would say that *The Rite of Spring* lacks the simplistic affective narratives that nationalism thrives on; regardless of how the ballet ends, *Swan Lake* is ultimately a fairy-tale about the triumph of goodness (and the whiteness of the white swan) over evil. Whether in protest or in propaganda, this simplicity is key, and for that reason, it is unlikely we have seen the last of *Swan Lake* protests. But in facing the imperialist aspirations of Russia, perhaps it is good to also remember how, a century ago, the narratives of madness and disappearance associated with Nijinsky's 1913 choreography seemed a perfect mirror to the mad war that caused the collapse of empires.

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[1] Pan-Slavism was a nineteenth-century imperialist ideology focusing on Slavic ethnicity; Eurasianism an early twentieth-century ideology focusing on the geographic unity of Eurasia as a transnational category (Laruelle 2007). Bassin, Glebov and Laruelle (2015) date Eurasianism to the 1920 Bucharest meeting of key figures in the movement, Prince Nikolai Sergeevich Trubetskoi, Petr Petrovich Suvchinskii, Petr Nikolaevich Savitskii, Georgi Vasilevich Florovskii and Prince Andrei Aleksandrovich Lieven. At the time, Eurasianism, especially Suvchinskii's lectures, attracted many of the Ballets Russes crowd, including the composer Igor Stravinsky. On the 'Russian World' as extending Russian nationalism beyond its borders but also relying on ethnicity in contradiction to the original Eurasianist inclusivity, see Kotkina (2017); Zevelev (2016); Anisimova (2018).

[2] *Vatnik* (Ru: ватник) is a slang term for someone believing and propagating state propaganda. It originates in a 2011 internet meme of a character wearing this kind of a Soviet-style padded jacket.

[3] Notable Soviet reworkings of *Swan Lake* include Gorsky's second version (1920 for the Bolshoi with a happy ending), Vaganova (1933 for the Kirov company with a tragic ending), Sergeyev (1950 for the Kirov with a happy ending), Bourmeister (1953 for the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Music Theatre, with happy ending) and Grigorovich (1969 for the Bolshoi with a happy ending, and 2001 with a tragic one). As I am writing this, the 1937 Messerer version with a happy ending is in the repertory of, for example, the Mikhailovsky Theatre in St. Petersburg and the Bourmeister in the repertory of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Music Theatre in Moscow.

[4] In Russian folk tales, shapeshifting swan maidens and magical swan-geese (гуси-лебеди, not to be confused with the real swan goose *anser cygnoides*, in Russian сухонос) are always powerful magical creatures, often, like the firebird (жар-птица), caught or summoned by the male hero. Doing harm or breaking promises made to these birds always spells disaster. One possible exception is The White Duck (Белая уточка) in Aleksandr Afanasiev's collection of Russian folk tales (first published between 1855–67). In the story, the disobedient wife of the king is transformed into a white duck by an evil witch who takes her place, much like Odile takes the place of the swan-princess Odette in *Swan Lake*.

[5] Wiley (1985: 32-8) notes that early on, the libretto was attributed to the artistic director Vladimir Begichev with possible assistance from the dancer Vasily Geltser. However, the 1877 programme attributed the composition to Reisinger. (Wiley 1985: 321-7; 342-4.)

[6] The former, established in 1885 by the railroad magnate Sava Mamontov, brought painters of fine art into theatre and focused on the music of Russian composers at a time when the Imperial Theatres favoured Italian opera (Haldey 2010: 228–58). The Moscow Arts Theatre, known for staging Chekhov's early plays, was a collaboration between merchant money in Konstantin Alekseyev aka. Stanislavsky and aristocratic privilege in Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. It is difficult to overstate the influence of this enterprise, later a state theatre, to the performing arts.

[7] Notably, Saint-Léon's *Little Hump-backed Horse* (1864) not only staged folk dances from all the 22 'races' of Imperial Russia but turned the evil Tsar of Ershov's fairy tale into an Oriental khan, recalling Mongol invasions of Russia; whereas Petipa's *Night and Day* (1883), an allegory composed for the coronation of Alexander III, had the Spirit of Russia reign supreme over nature and all the ethnic groups of the empire **(**Roslavleva 1966: 71).

[8] It would have been well-nigh impossible for Diaghilev to attract dancers from the Imperial Theatres without giving them classical (academic) parts in which to show off their technique, as he was already competing with both foreign variety theatres and other Russian touring companies (Guest 1960; Laakkonen 2009; Stalter-Pace 2020: 77-89).

[9] Unlike e.g. Garafola ([1989] 1992: 4–7) represents, the 1905 ballet strike was *against*, not *for*, the new ballet: the strikers, including many future Ballets Russes stars like Fokine, Karsavina and Pavlova demanded the ousting of Aleksandr Gorsky. Fokine would later take credit for inventing the new ballet, but his 'conversion' after dancing in Gorsky's *Don Quixote* in 1906 was not unknown to Russian ballet critics evaluating his contributions to the art form (Frame 2000: 129–31; Järvinen 2014: esp. 212–7).

[10] A case in point is Stravinsky, whose denigrating statements very much turned Russian critics against him (Stravinsky and Craft 1978: 522–526; Taruskin 1996: 978–988).

[11] For example, in the preface to Charles Gustave Desrat's 1895 *Dictionnaire de la Danse*, the librettist of *Coppélia*, Charles-Louis-Étienne Nuittier (1895: iv), claimed the fashion for female dancers in male parts will inevitably cause a decline in the art form.

[12] Ivan Narodny, pseudonym of the Estonian Jaan Sibul, was a prominent dance critic in e.g. *Musical America* – the name translates as 'John of the People'.

[13] E.g. Roslavleva (1966: 182–3) condemned the Nijinsky choreographies as evidence of how '[Diaghilev] forsook the dancing traditions of Russian ballet', and stated that after these, the Ballets Russes 'is a page in the history of West-European, not Russian, ballet.' See also Kuznetsova (2022) on this opinion.

[14] Walter Mignolo establishes the collapse of the USSR as the historical point where the Third World mutated into the Global South, and insists that the colonial matrix of power requires examining how coloniality is constitutive of the Eurocentric understanding of modernity represented as 'neutral' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 110–15). Madina Tlostanova (2011: 71) notes this is equally true of how Russia wields power in the post-Communist bloc. Tolz (2019); Walke (2019) on racism in Imperial and Soviet Russia.

[15] In 2019, the American ballerina Misty Copeland criticised photographs of two Bolshoy company dancers in blackface at the rehearsals of Petipa's *La Bayadère*. The company representatives dismissed the critique and the ballet, like Fokine's equally offensive *Petrouchka*, continues in the repertories of Russian companies. (Fieldstadt 2019; Marshall 2019; also Järvinen 2020b).

[16] This origin narrative is largely based on interpretations of one medieval source, the so-called *Primary Chronicle* or *the Chronicle of Bygone Years*, attributed to a Christian monk, Nestor. Written in the twelfth century, it is known through two surviving codexes, the older of which is from 1377. It is not a primary source but rather something written for an audience embroiled in a dispute over rights to rule a large geographical area in what is now Eastern Europe.

[17] *Mlada* had been planned first as a ballet in 1870, then as an opera-ballet in 1872 and finally in a ballet by Petipa to the music by Minkus (partly taken from the abandoned projects) first performed in 1879 in St. Petersburg and revived in 1896 (Wiley [1997] 2007: 125-31).

[18] There are very obvious similarities between Roerich's designs and those of Viktor Vasnetsov, for example, and Roerich's contribution was generally seen as the least interesting aspect of the novelty (Järvinen 2020a; 2021).

[19] Jacques Rivière's famous articles in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* are a case in point. Jacques-Emile Blanche praised Rivière in his review of the season for *La Revue de Paris*, together with the opinions of Pierre Lalo, a music critic who later wrote an incredibly racist tirade about Nijinsky's choreography (see Järvinen 2021).

[20] Any critical assessment of the Roerichs quickly runs into fabrications influenced by their spiritualist, esoteric and theosophical beliefs. Unfortunately, due to the focal role given to Roerich by the authors of the so-called 'reconstruction' of *The Rite of Spring* (1989), rather wild claims have been made about *The Rite of Spring* as something designed to cause mystical experiences in the audience. C.f. Andreyev (2014) for a more critical view.

[21] That is, the ethnonationalist *ruskii*, Russian, is opposed to *rossiiskii*, Russian in the sense of citizen of the Federation.

[22] In 2013, the Hodson choreography was paired with Sasha Waltz's *Sacre* (2013), which generally received most of the attention (Butsko 2013; Kuznetsova 2022).
[23] The post hoc fallacy that *The Rite of Spring* 'predicted' the First World War seems to derive from Cocteau (1918).
[24] In the June elections, Kazakhstan enacted major constitutional reforms. In a symbolic gesture, Nur-Sultan was renamed Astana, which is Kazakh for 'capital city'.