Muses in Combat

Soviet Ballet During the Great Patriotic War

Katherine Okie

History 495

5 December 2013
Moscow’s long nights of summer had just begun. It had been a quiet Saturday, the 21st of June, but inside an imposing building on Theater Square a rustle of excitement began to mount. Students of the Moscow State Choreographic Academy, one of Russia’s premiere ballet schools, were preparing for their annual graduation concert. Behind the heavy curtain, aspiring young dancers with their eyes on a bright future prepared for a performance that would be their testing ground; if they danced well they could count on a career in the Bolshoi Ballet, but if they failed they could bid farewell forever to Russia’s most lauded stage. The graduates of this 1941 class felt even more pressure than normal to perform well, for this year’s concert was for the first time being given on the second stage of the Bolshoi Theater rather than in the academy. On the other side of the curtain, the audience gathered, an awe-inspiring audience of Russia’s most respected and devoted ballet fans. The orchestra tuned up, the dancers took their places in the wings, and a sudden hush fell over the audience as the curtain rose on what would be a performance that no one would ever forget.

What seared this night so strongly in people’s memory was not the performance itself, although it was first-class, but rather the contrast it made with the events immediately following it. Taking their final bows, the young dancers knew that they were standing on the same stage that Russia’s greatest dancers had occupied for generations, and they anticipated following the same paths of these great artists of the past. What they did not know, was that as they stood looking into the darkness beyond the footlights, they were standing on the brink of changes
greater than anyone could then imagine. The curtains closed for the last time, and the theater slowly emptied. Early the next morning, the Nazis invaded.¹

By that summer of 1941, ballet had assumed a unique place in the Soviet society that was just two decades old. More than any other art form, its story was directly tied to that of the nation and its government. In the old Tsarist days before the Bolshevik Revolution, ballet had been a symbol of aristocracy and dynastic grandeur. Performances were attended exclusively by the royal family and its entourage. The Romanov dynasty had associated especially closely with the ballet. For a time, Tsar Nicholas II even kept the great ballerina Mathilda Kschessinkaya as is mistress.² In those days, students at the state supported ballet academy lived as part of the Tsar’s household, travelling between school and theater in glittering royal coaches.³ They were brought up to honor unquestioningly Russia’s Tsarist heritage. Near the end of the Romanov dynasty, ballerina Tamara Karsavina described her life as an imperial ballet student: “The fashion of our clothes belonged to the preceding century, but was well in keeping with the spirit of the institution, with its severe detachment from the life outside its walls. Vowed to the theater, we were kept from contact with the world as from a contamination . . . we were brought up in almost convent-like seclusion.”⁴

¹ Maya Plisetskaya, *I, Maya Plisetskaya*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 49-51. Note: Plisetskaya mistakenly gave the date of this performance as “June 21, 1941, a Sunday.” June 21 was actually a Saturday.


³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Quoted in Ibid., 13.
It is no surprise then, that after 1917 when the old order collapsed in the revolutionary fire of the new, the Bolshevik reformers cast a suspicious eye on this overtly bourgeois art form. The great debate of Soviet era ballet thus began. Some radical Bolsheviks protested that any association with ballet would taint the Soviet experiment’s reputation; ballet, after all, not only carried the mark of Romanov memory, its repertoire also unabashedly told stories of individualism that went directly against Soviet values. On the other hand, apologists argued that if proper measures were taken to control the production content, ballet could become a useful Soviet tool; using ballet to reinforce Party loyalty and teach Soviet values to the masses would, they argued, help build a solid Soviet citizenry. In the end, this latter viewpoint won the debate and ballet was opened to the masses as a propaganda tool.

When the 1918 ballet season opened, for the first time in history the plush seats of Russia’s renowned theaters were filled not with elegant gentlemen and bejeweled ladies but with ordinary workers in plain dress. No one knew how these members of the proletarian class would receive what for them was an entirely foreign art. Into the theater came “workers and peasants in grey greatcoats, in leather jackets, in shawls – in work and war clothes, now and then even with rifles in their hands – everybody’s heart began to beat anxiously. . .,” the director of the Mariinsky theater remembered. They need not have worried. Though at first this new audience was taken aback by the enormous stage filled with lightly clad, silent people, moving to music

---

5 Ibid., 4.


7 Ezrahi, Swans of the Kremlin, 15-16.
issuing from the pit at their feet, before much time had passed Russia’s working class had become devoted balletomanes.⁸ Tickets soon were so prized and so difficult to obtain that families bequeathed them to their children.⁹ Ballet had become the Soviet Union’s beloved art, and its propaganda potential finally endeared itself to the Party.

The Russian theaters, however, did not welcome their new role as Soviet educators. The artists published a statement strongly renouncing the government’s new authority over their repertoire: “We protest against the violent vandalism that has not even spared the ancient holy of holies of the Russian people, the temples and monuments of art and culture. The State Moscow Bolshoi Theater, as an autonomous artistic institution, does not recognize the right of interference in its internal and artistic life of any authorities who have not been elected by the theatre and are not on its staff.”¹⁰ Russia’s dancers devised methods of “artistic repossession” by which they could push back against Soviet restrictions and maintain a degree of artistic autonomy.¹¹ The new Soviet ballet was in the center of a three-way relationship between government, artist, and audience. The government could dictate regulations to the artists, but

---

⁸ A “Balletomane” is a person with a mania for ballet.

⁹ Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹¹ “Artistic Repossession” is a term coined by Christina Ezrahi. Her book, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia*, to date remains the only scholarly analysis of Soviet ballet available in English. It does not, however, discuss ballet during the war years of 1941-1945. In English language historiography, Soviet ballet during the Great Patriotic War is largely an untouched area of study; this paper is the first time the collective story of Russia’s wartime dancers has been told.
ultimately success depended on the people whose new fascination with ballet kept the theater audiences filled. Throughout the Soviet era, the Russian public consistently preferred to see the classics, and many new propaganda productions commissioned by the government had to be dropped from the repertoire.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, dancers were able to turn the system to their advantage and preserve ballet’s heritage from the threats of Soviet “improvements.”

So it was, that on the eve of World War II – known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War - ballet was poised to be a powerful tool for Russia’s war effort, for the Soviet people, the Party, and the Red Army. The masses had learned to love the ballet, eagerly taking in the repertoire and discussing their favorite dancers. When the shock of that June morning in 1941 turned their lives upside-down, both civilians and soldiers turned to classic ballet as a haven of stability. The Party had, although not unquestioned, established itself as the ultimate authority dictating the purpose of Russian ballet. The Nazi invasion required a unified response, and ballet proved the perfect medium with which to unite the masses. Indeed, the “artistic repossession” of the Soviet era was strangely missing during the war years. I argue that the war united the artists and the government toward a common goal of using art to win the war – for the populous, the party, and the Red Army troops – and that between them they managed to keep ballet alive despite the great odds brought by war.

That fateful day in 1941 was never to be forgotten by the millions of Russians who lived through it. A young dancer named Maya Plisetskaya – destined to become one of the Soviet Union’s most celebrated dancers at home and abroad – was just entering the crucial advanced years of her training at the state ballet academy in Moscow. “I remember the first day of the war very well,” she later wrote. “People huddled in the streets around loudspeakers broadcasting

\textsuperscript{12} Ezrahi, \textit{Swans of the Kremlin}., 237.
heroic music and giving the latest news.” Like so many Soviet artists, Plisetskaya’s life, her work and ambitions, would be challenged by the war. “The Germans bombed Moscow that night,” she wrote. “The whole city was plunged into darkness.” Nevertheless, through sheer determination and devotion to their art form, dancers like Plisetskaya not only kept ballet alive and thriving, they also mobilized it for war. As one historian of Russian ballet has noted, “the muses can go into combat along with the soldiers.”

Initially, many dancers responded to the shock of invasion by taking the path so many other Russians had taken, by laying down their profession to join the war effort. Whereas only shortly before the Bolshoi Theater stage had been the setting for theatrical military maneuvers in *Flames of Paris*, the men of the company now used the stage to drill in earnest. At the Kirov Theater in Leningrad, production work on Aram Khachaturian’s new ballet *Gayanne* was suspended and the theater Craft Shops were put to work making camouflage. The dancers stood in shifts to guard the theater. Many dancers even joined the armed forces or volunteered to dig

---


14 Ibid., 53.


anti-tank ditches outside the cities. In Moscow, a Red Army officer was surprised to find a large group of volunteers from the Bolshoi Theater “at the bottom of the trench, in glutinous mud . . . Their faces were tired and wet.” When he suggested that such grueling work be given to other volunteers, they replied simply, “It’s worse at the front. We’ll survive, we’ll put up with everything, so long as our people can hold Moscow.”18

Though they readily offered their services in the traditional war effort, Russia’s dancers were eager to enlist their art as well. They knew that ballet had great power to influence the Russian society, both public and private. Since the opening of ballet to the masses in the 1920s, the Russian public had become avid balletomanes. British war correspondent Alexander Werth wrote of attending ballet performances at the Bolshoi, and while he personally didn’t favor that style of entertainment, he couldn’t help but be impressed by the ardent devotion Russians showed for the ballet, and for their favorite dancers. There was a “feud among ballet-goers,” he wrote, “between the worshippers of Ulanova and those of Lepeshinskaya, the two rival prima ballerinas. Only in a country where the theatre is really part of life, and not one of the frills of life, can people feel so strongly about such matters.”19 The government leaders, also, had come to rely on the ballet to legitimize their power as Russia’s new elite. Sitting in the audience at the Bolshoi in Moscow, Werth described the people he saw: “The Embassy, the Military Mission, . . . and the American Embassy, and the various legations . . . all turned up in force, doing a couple

ironically, was one of the new Soviet-themed productions, set on an Armenian collective farm. See Ezrahi, Swans of the Kremlin, 263.

18 Braithwaite, Moscow 1941, 121.

19 Quoted in Braithwaite, Moscow 1941, 155.
All hundred Russians out of their seats . . . Of course everybody was at the ballet." The Red Army troops would also come to love the ballet during the war years, just as their fathers had when dancers toured the front during the Civil War some twenty years earlier. Ballet, in short, had become Russia’s beloved art. Dancers realized the potential of their art form for the war effort and willingly laid aside their former quarrels with the government in order to help the war effort. The government, too, came to recognize the value of ballet to the populous, the party, and the military, and enlisted it accordingly.

Most conspicuously, Russia’s dancers were instrumental to maintaining the popular morale. Realizing the power of ballet in this respect, the government immediately took steps to protect it from the approaching Nazis. As the German army rolled closer to Moscow and Leningrad in the fall of 1941, the Soviet government organized an evacuation of the leading ballet companies in both cities. The Kirov theater and school left for Perm, little knowing that by doing so they were escaping one of the greatest tragedies of the war, the infamous siege of Leningrad. The Bolshoi Theater’s entourage en route to Kuibyshev in the Urals included forty carriages and thirty-five wagons. Working in formidable conditions, the dancers determined to bring their art to the Russian public, many of whom in these remote villages had never before had the opportunity to enjoy it. In 1941, the evacuated Bolshoi managed to give eighty-nine

---


23 Braithwaite, *Moscow 1941*, 245.
performances in Kuibyshev. Neither were the ballet students of the Bolshoi’s Academy idle. Dancing in unheated buildings – making ballet’s muscular precision and fluidity difficult and even dangerous - these students brought the best of Russian ballet to a grateful public.

For young Maya Plisetskaya, the evacuation threatened to destroy her dreams of a dancing career. Hearing a rumor that the school would be evacuated to Sverdlovsk, she and her mother travelled there immediately by train, but found only an impoverished village and no opportunities to study ballet. “This accidental mistake cost me dearly,” Plisetskaya remembered. “An entire year, from fifteen and a half to sixteen and a half, I spent without working at ballet.”

In a profession where success depended on continual rigorous training early in life, one lost year might prove impossible to recover. Learning that some of the academy’s students and teachers had remained in Moscow to continue training, Plisetskaya made a rash decision. “I kept repeating to myself, ‘To Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow . . .’ But how? You needed a special pass. . . I decided to take a desperate step – to make my way into Moscow illegally.” She boarded a train bound for the city, bypassing military patrols by carrying luggage for elderly passengers and posing as their companions. At last, after five days of suspense, she crossed safely into Moscow.

There, Plisetskaya found that the ballet community had not been idle. A significant number of dancers, teachers, and students had chosen to remain in the city despite the danger,


25 Ibid.

26 Plisetskaya, I Maya Plisetskaya, 53.

27 Ibid., 55-6.
determined to help the war effort by bringing their art to the people. During the first frenzied days of the war, one of the Bolshoi’s premier dancers, Mikhail Gabovich, had enlisted in the “Destroyer Battalion.” While serving outside Moscow, he had gained permission to organize a ballet company from the remnants of the Bolshoi Theater and school to perform on the Bolshoi’s unheated Annex stage. Though party officials at first accused the dancers of being counter-revolutionary for insisting that the arts were just as important to the war effort as digging trenches, they soon realized the value of cooperation and gave their approval. The opening show in this makeshift theater, despite three interruptions by air raids, played to a full house. The appreciative Muscovites, war weary and hungry, took in the show with a lively humor, laughing and clapping, encouraging the performers. Unable to buy flowers to throw from the galleries at the final curtain in the Russian tradition, they instead showered the performers with branches and leaves.\(^{28}\)

Moscow’s dancers and government had partnered to bring ballet to the people in spite of war, and thanks to their efforts ballet had not been neglected. Though at times it had seemed impossible, Maya Plisetskaya was at last ready to graduate from the Bolshoi Academy. Two years previously, she had watched the graduating class give a special performance before the city’s greatest balletomanes. Now, her own graduation was overshadowed by war. “The examination day came,” Plisetskaya later remembered. “It was late March 1943. The war continued. Mother was still in Sverdlovsk. Everyone was expecting the second front to open . . . A lot of people crowded into Room 6. But it was nothing special . . . It was extremely businesslike, without flowers or ovations. We all knew that we would be accepted into the

theater. The troupe that remained in Moscow needed more people."²⁹ This newest generation of
dancers took up the cause the older dancers had begun two years before, dedicating their art to
the war effort.

In addition to the performances at the Bolshoi annex, Moscow’s dancers travelled around
the city, joining with other artists to give concert performances for the population. Maya
Plisetskaya wrote that the audiences who gathered to watch these concerts “were wonderful.
Badly washed and poorly dressed, they lived off ration cards, exchanging them for food and
material goods, but they were hungry for the minutest display of artistic expression from the
shabby, crudely built stage.”³⁰ Dancers and public were struggling together in the war-torn city,
inspiring one another to carry on. The great ballerina Galina Ulanova, one of the two mentioned
by Alexander Werth, later remembered that she “felt drawn more closely than ever to the people.
They were giving their all, spiritually and physically, to the war effort. The realization of this led
me to dance Juliet differently after the war. I now put more features on Juliet’s moral courage
and resolve.”³¹

Meanwhile in Leningrad, some of the ballet community had also refused evacuation, and
had continued to rehearse and perform during what would turn out to be some of the worst
hardships of the war, the siege of Leningrad. ³² The city’s infamous 900 days of starvation

²⁹ Plisetskaya, I Maya Plisetskaya, 57.

³⁰ Ibid., 60-1.


³² For information about the siege of Leningrad, see Michael Jones, Leningrad: State of
stretched people to their breaking point, testing their tenacity and their very ability to remain human. In the darkest days of the siege, when rations were hardly worth mentioning and crime and cannibalism threatened from every side, Leningraders such as ballet teacher Vera Kostrovitskaya discovered the power of art to keep them from giving up in despair. Every day, Kostrovitskaya looked out her apartment window to see a group of musicians gathering on the street below. “Usually the clarinet would begin, establishing the melody,” she wrote, “then it would be repeated by the first two trumpets, and then the trombone and flute joined in. The drummer, when he was free, filled the roll of conductor . . . During those hours, it seemed that one need only to gather one’s strength, endure a week or two, and all would be like it was before the war.”

Amidst the hardships and horrors of the siege, even in the bleak November when the scanty bread rations dropped to a mere 125 grams, ballet dancers and students persevered to bring their art to the people of Leningrad. “On one typical occasion,” Vera Kostrovitskaya remembered, “as sirens were announcing the air-raid alert, we tried to finish a number we were rehearsing. Completing the dance, a nervous and strong chord played on the piano by the accompanieest occurred at the same time a bomb exploded. . . After that, we all ran to the dressing room, put on our street clothes and fur coats, and went downstairs to the bomb shelter.” The legendary teacher Agrippina Vaganova, who developed the system of ballet training that is still used in Russia today, kept a watchful eye on the rehearsals, encouraging the dancers to do their best in spite of weakness and cold. Once, when they failed to perform up to


34 Ibid., xxii.

her standards, she stopped the rehearsal and called out, “Girls, did you also evacuate your jumps? . . . Bring them back!”36 This dedication kept ballet alive in the city of death. “There was a powerful energy flowing between artist and audience in the besieged city,” pianist Maria Yudina remembered, “one that allowed them to rise above the day-to-day horrors they all faced.”37 In Leningrad, in Moscow, and in the small villages of the Urals, Russia’s dancers had enlisted their art to bring the population a welcome relief from the grim realities of war.

Not only was ballet essential to maintaining popular morale, it also proved a useful tool for the wartime Party, both in Russia and abroad. Despite past differences, dancers and government now worked together to promote Party interests. True, the Soviet government still insisted on strict control over the wartime repertoire, recognizing the value of ballet as propaganda. All productions must be granted special license before they could be performed, and “all entertainment of a gypsy, sentimental or decadent kind” was banned outright.38 Now, however, the ballet community was more willing to work with the government, united as they were by the common goal of winning the war. In 1942, for instance, in honor of the 25th anniversary of the Revolution, the Kirov and the Bolshoi theaters demonstrated their support for the Party by joining forces to give a thousand performances of newly created patriotic productions.39

36 Ibid., 232.
37 Jones, Leningrad, 254.
38 Braithwaite, Moscow 1941, 273.
Not only the theaters, but also individual dancers used their art to support the Party, although from varied motives. One of the most conspicuous Party supporters was Lidiya Tager, director of the ballet academy that had stayed in Leningrad during the siege. As the wife of the head Provisions Officer of the city, she enjoyed a wealth and prosperity that contrasted grimly with the hardships all around. Vera Kostrovitskaya watched Tager come to the school day after day in opulent fineries, counting four fur coats, twenty dresses, and numerous expensive jewels.\(^{40}\) From Tager’s viewpoint, ballet must be seen to support the war effort in order to reinforce her own image as a loyal Soviet. Though the ballet students were weak from hunger and suffering from scurvy, Tager forced them to dance a concert for the Leningrad leaders, threatening to confiscate their ration cards if they did not dance their best. “Yes, there was a ‘dying swan’ and other such nonsense,” Kostrovitskaya remembered bitterly. One young boy was so sick he could climb onto the stage only with her support, his face covered with make-up “to make him look like a living person.” At intermission, he collapsed, but Tager had made her statement. She had shown ballet to be loyal to the Soviet cause.\(^{41}\)

In Moscow, Maya Plisetskaya also used her art to support the Party, but for very different reasons. Plisetskaya has been called “the anti-Soviet who would not emigrate.”\(^{42}\) Her childhood had been punctuated by first-hand experiences of Stalin’s cruelty; the Party for her was the thing that had murdered her father, imprisoned her mother, and cast a black stain on her own record for

\(^{40}\) Jones, *Leningrad*, 245.

\(^{41}\) Ibid, 255.

\(^{42}\) Tim Scholl, forward to the English edition of *I, Maya Plisetskaya*, by Maya Plisetskaya, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), xi-xii.
being their child. In peacetime, Plisetskaya openly abhorred Bolshevism. Nevertheless, she was devoted to her country, to Russia, and in the face of the common Nazi threat she swallowed her hatred and worked with the Party. Just as ballet students in Leningrad performed for political leaders, so the Moscow academy gave a concert for the NKVD. “When I took my bows,” Plisetskaya wrote, “I tried to make out the faces of the people in the auditorium. Were they really people? Were they the ones who had come up the creaking stairs on Garainsky, rummaged in our closets, rifled Father’s bookshelves, and shoved him into a Black Maria. . . ?” Though she was revolted at this government, she determined to dance her best for the sake of her beloved country. Like Tager, Plisetskaya was determined that ballet be enlisted in the war effort.

Not only did the ballet promote Party interests within the Soviet Union, it also was instrumental in securing Allied favor abroad. Like all arts, ballet had the power to bridge cultural barriers and find common ground between countries that might disagree politically. By the time the war broke out, many Europeans and Americans already perceived Russia through a ballet lens. Since the 1920s, Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes had been touring Europe and America, spreading popular awareness of Russian ballet. “At that time everything Russian was in vogue,” wrote Alexandra Danilova, one of Diaghilev’s dancers. “This was, of course, Diaghilev’s doing; before his Ballet Russes arrived, Europeans thought that all Russians ate children for breakfast.” Ballet had thus paved the way to greater respect between Westerners and Soviets, respect that served both societies well when they unexpectedly found themselves Allies.

---

43 Plisetskaya, I Maya Plisetskaya, 34, 39.

44 Ibid., 46.

Soviet government took full advantage of ballet as a cultural ambassador and used it to promote Party interests abroad. In 1942, the Russian Opera in London produced a ballet titled *The Great Gates of Kiev*, promoting the improvements of the new Russia over the old.\textsuperscript{46} In America, dispatches to the newspapers celebrated the Russian wartime ballet, painting its determination to continue in the midst of hardship as a characteristic of the Russian nation as a whole.\textsuperscript{47} When Winston Churchill travelled to Moscow to meet with Stalin, he was treated to a performance of *Swan Lake* with Galina Ulanova dancing the lead.\textsuperscript{48} Ballet had become a symbol to the world of the Party’s prosperity and tenacity, even in the midst of war.

Not only did Russia’s ballet dancers inspire perseverance and patriotism in the population and promote party interests, they also used their art to support the Red Army. Soldiers on the Soviet front lived, fought, and died in some of the worst conditions imaginable. Just as the civilian population discovered the value of art during hardship, so the soldiers eagerly turned to poetry, song, dance, and theater to forget for a time the grim realities of life at the front. From the very first day of the war, the government ordered that “wherever units of the army or navy can be found, art workers will be sharing their lives. Now as never before, art will be a mighty and


\textsuperscript{48}Kahn, *Days with Ulanova*, 118.
warlike means of victory of communism over facism.” Along with hundreds of other artists across all genres, Russia’s ballet community immediately rose to the challenge and responded to the government’s call for art at the front.

Dancers flocked to military hospitals to bring a few minutes of joy to the wounded troops. Maya Plisetskaya, although her political views contrasted sharply with the Soviet government’s, willingly responded to the official call, travelling to frontline hospitals to dance for the troops. “I never refused . . . ,” she said:

“I always gave my all at those hospital concerts, with total sincerity and warmth. The faces of the wounded young men, wrapped in soiled bandages, were pure, defenseless, open to the world. They took in everything we danced, played, and sang for them as seriously and enthusiastically as if Chaliapin and Galli-Curei were singing for them, Pavlova and Nijinsky were dancing for them, and Liszt and Paganini were playing for them. And the questioning expressions in their eyes always troubled me. I felt sorry for those boys.”

Desire to help the war effort had supplanted Plisetskaya’s objections to the government that directed it.

---


Russia’s dancers also took their places among the concert brigades that toured the front, bringing art directly to the active troops. As one historian of Russian ballet has noted, “They danced in light ballet garments in the most improbable locations, including snowy forest clearings and on open trucks, in any weather, and sometimes even under enemy fire. Ballerina Susanna Zvyagina of the Bolshoi Theater dedicated her art to the war effort for the duration of the conflict, bringing ballet to the troops no matter how bad the conditions. Even at Stalingrad, one of the war’s deadliest battles, she risked being shot in a dangerous crossing of the Volga River to dance for the troops holding the city. Once, when she dropped to the ground to avoid enemy fire, the treacherous mud sucked her down, and she was unable to get free for six hours. Zvyagina followed the army to the very end, at last giving a celebration performance in the newly liberated Berlin.

These dancers at the front, though they did not serve in combat roles, faced many of the same risks as the soldiers in active duty against the enemy. When the German Army’s Operation Typhoon drove forward towards Moscow in the fall of 1941, scattering before it armies and civilians alike, a whole company of dancers and other entertainers were captured and sent to Nazi prison camps. The risks were great, but dancers realized the importance of their art to the men at the front. Galina Ulanova later remembered that “from our fighting men at the front, we received daily corroboration of how dear the theatre was to them.” For these soldiers, ballet gave

52 Braithwaite, Moscow 1941, 122.
them a rare bit of beauty amid the ugliness of war. One Red Army soldier wrote to Ulanova that while passing through an abandoned village, he had “found a picture of you as Odette in Swan Lake. The picture has a few bullet holes but all the same the boys took it to their quarters, and while we’re having a lull the orderly’s standing assignment is to place fresh flowers in front of it every day.” Letters such as these convinced the dancers that their contributions to the war effort were important and also reinforced the strong national unity they had begun to discover. “These men who wrote to me were strangers,” Ulanova said, “but they were as dear to me as brothers.”

By the end of four weary years, few people doubted that the war was nearly over. The costs had been many, but Russians – government, soldier, and civilian – had succeeded against their common enemy. The Kirov ballet returned to Leningrad to rebuilt its theater in the emaciated city. The Bolshoi’s entourage of wagons and carriages retraced its path back from Kuibyshev to Moscow. Maya Plisetskaya again danced Swan Lake on the Bolshoi stage.

“Stalin’s red mustache twitched in the darkness of the armored state box during one of the ballet performances. A deluge of bodyguards in civilian clothes, as alike as peas in a pod, flooded the theater and stood, shifting their weight from foot to foot, vigilantly scrutinizing everyone from head to toe, as if to prove we weren’t imagining things.” The sounds of gunfire gradually faded from people’s memories and normalcy slowly returned.

For four long years, Russia’s dancers had dedicated their art to winning the war, and though their contributions well served the population, the Party, and the Red Army, they were not without consequences. Russian ballet had suffered because of the war. Despite careful

54 Kahn, Days with Ulanova, 118.

55 Plisetskaya, I Maya Plisetskaya, 67-8.
camouflaging, both the Bolshoi and the Kirov theaters had been bombed.56 Even the smaller theaters such as the Moscow Art Theatre did not escape the air raids.57 The ballet repertoire also initially suffered from the war. Work on new ballets was temporarily suspended while the companies recoiled from the shock of invasion. Only in evacuation would production again move forward. The ballet community also suffered simply because the war had robbed it of almost an entire generation of dancers. Whether they had been killed at the front as soldiers or entertainers, or starved to death in Leningrad, or forced into exile because they had German last names, many young dancers who should have been destined for great dancing careers were purged by the war. Of Maya Plisetskaya’s entire graduating class, all the boys but one were either killed or exiled.58

Nevertheless, because of the dancers’ devotion and their willingness to work with the government’s wartime plan, Russian ballet’s wartime legacy was actually positive overall. Though work on new productions had to be postponed initially, in the long run the lighter performance schedule during the evacuation gave the artists the opportunity to work uninterrupted on new productions. Arguably one of the most lasting and widespread Russian ballets of the entire Soviet era was completed during the war years, Prokofiev’s Cinderella.59 Perhaps the war’s most notable positive legacy was the diffusion of ballet into remote areas of the Soviet Union. The evacuations brought ballet to small mountain villages that had previously

56 Braithwaite, Moscow 1941, 180, and Mary Swift, The Art of the Dance in the U.S.S.R., 125.
57 Braithwaite, Moscow 1941, 175.
58 Plisetskaya, I Maya Plisetskaya, 32. Erik Volodin was the only male member of Plisetskaya’s class to survive the war and pursue a dance career.
seen little of the high culture of Moscow and Leningrad. In Perm, the Leningrad ballet academy’s wartime presence was the start of the town’s own ballet school, which now ranks among Russia’s top ballet academies. Instead of suppressing ballet, as at first had seemed likely, the war had allowed it to grow and spread.

While Soviet artists had resisted governmental control of their work in the two decades preceding the war, the common Nazi enemy and threats to the motherland united them behind the government and the war effort. Despite the hardships of working in a besieged city or in a remote village, they persevered, bringing their art to the suffering population. They laid aside their objections to Soviet control and used their art to promote the party at home and abroad. Despite frontline dangers, they followed the Red Army to the war’s most heated battlefields to bring precious moments of relief to the troops. That steadfast dedication, which kept their art live despite great odds, deserves further research and commemoration.

---

Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


