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## Ballet, propaganda, and politics in the Cold War: the Bolshoi Ballet in London and the Sadler's Wells Ballet in Moscow, October–November 1956

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### ABSTRACT

In the autumn of 1956, the Bolshoi Ballet arrived for its first London tour, providing the researcher with an opportunity for in-depth analysis of British-Soviet relations during the Cold War. The paper looks at behind-the-scenes negotiations and how the most mundane organisational matters could take on immense importance in a Cold War environment. By bringing to the fore the mass-media and political factors involved, the ballet can be seen for what it actually was at the time: a powerful cultural and diplomatic tool.

### KEYWORDS

Ballet; Bolshoi; Britain; cultural diplomacy; USSR

On 29 September 1956, 150 dancers from the Bolshoi Ballet landed in London's deep fog for a four-week tour.<sup>1</sup> Given the diplomatic and logistical challenges, preparations had dragged on for over a year. The tour was historic *sui generis* whether in the sheer number of dancers involved – the troupe arrived 'en bloc', – the number of performances – 28 – or the number of spectators – over 55,000.<sup>2</sup> From late September to early November 1956, the 'Soviets' were the rage of London. Despite intense anti-communist propaganda, balletomanes queued up three days and nights for tickets.<sup>3</sup> It was an unprecedented popular and artistic success, but it all ended abruptly on 4 November, as the dancers flew back to the USSR just a few short hours before Russian tanks entered Budapest.<sup>4</sup>

That the 1956 Bolshoi Ballet tour was feasible at all owed to a lull in tensions – though not yet full-blown *détente* – that followed the May 1955 Geneva Summit.<sup>5</sup> Following the visit by Bulganin and Khrushchev to London in May 1956, which reopened British-Soviet

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<sup>1</sup>Margot Fonteyn, *Autobiography* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), 156.

<sup>2</sup>Note from Controller of Arts and Science Division, British Council to Soviet Relations Committee, 26 July 1955, BW64/30, The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA); Bolshoi Ballet Programme, 3 to 27 October 1956, Royal Academy of Dance Library (hereafter RADL) and 'Visit to be Extended. Three Evenings at Croydon Theatre,' *Times*, 13 October 1956, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda (1945–53): The Information Research Department* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>Three Days Queuing for the Bolshoi Tickets,' *The Observer*, 26 August 1956 in Royal Opera House Collections, Ballet/dance companies other than Covent Garden, Bolshoi Ballet 1956/1957.

<sup>5</sup>Günter Bischof and Saki Dockrill, eds., *Cold War Respite old War Respite in Roya1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

relations, this tour by the Bolshoi Ballet was intended to be a milestone along the way – punctuated by some disruption nonetheless.<sup>6</sup> Intense diplomatic negotiations preceded the tour, and it was nearly cancelled when Nina Ponomareva, a Soviet athlete, was accused of shoplifting in late August 1956.<sup>7</sup> The tour was designed as a two-way exchange, like the France/USSR agreement in April–May 1954, whereby the Bolshoi Ballet would perform in London in October 1956 and the Sadler’s Wells Ballet in Moscow in November of that year.<sup>8</sup> I argue that it illustrates how porous the Iron Curtain could be in artistic matters.<sup>9</sup> The British dancer and choreographer Anton Dolin (1904–1983) stressed how important it was for the Western ballet world to see the Bolshoi at Covent Garden.<sup>10</sup> He declared: ‘If a bomb dropped on this opera house, then America would rule the world of ballet.’<sup>11</sup> As a cultural export, the ballet was in essence soft power, the dancing body being not just a metaphor but real, tangible propaganda for the Soviets’ educational model, for their mastery of the traditional repertoire, a showcase for their finest and most athletic dancers, and thus for the *homo sovieticus*.<sup>12</sup> It put paid to the Western *cliché* of the Soviet citizenry as dull and barbarous.<sup>13</sup>

By the late 1990s, Cold War studies began to look at dance within the ‘cultural turn’, through research showing how ballet served as a veritable diplomatic tool.<sup>14</sup> It was ‘dancing diplomacy’, as it were.<sup>15</sup> Since most of the scholars were in fact American, such as Naima Prevots who analysed US cultural diplomacy through dance, they focused in the main on American ballet.<sup>16</sup> Victoria Phillips Geduld studied the impact of Martha Graham’s official tours.<sup>17</sup> Clare Croft has scrutinised US choreography.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Catherine Gunther Kodat has examined the Cold War through the eyes of Georges Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, and Yuri Grigorovitch *et al.*<sup>19</sup> David Caute, a British scholar, has scrutinised the role played by defectors such as Rudolf Nureyev.<sup>20</sup> In the West however,

<sup>6</sup>Bulgarian and Khrushchev visit Downing Street, *British Pathé*, 1956, 1m55s, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/bulgarian-and-khrushchev-visit-downing-street/> (accessed 14 June 2017). See their visit to the Royal Opera House, <http://www.gettyimages.be/detail/nieuwsfoto's/le-marechal-nikolai-bulganin-et-nikita-khrushchev-avec-le-nieuwsfotos/492439748?#le-marechal-nikolai-bulganin-et-nikita-khrushchev-avec-le-premier-picture-id492439748>, 26 April 1956 (accessed 14 June 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Robert Edelman, ‘The Five Hats of Nina Ponomareva: Sport, Shoplifting and the Cold War’, *Cold War History*, 8 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup>France sent its Comédie-Française to Moscow in April 1954, while in May 1954, the finest Bolshoi and Kirov artists travelled to Paris before the tour was broken off.

<sup>9</sup>György Péteri, ‘Nylon Curtain – Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe’, *Slavonica* 10, no. 2 (2004): 113–23.

<sup>10</sup>Dolin had also appeared with Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*. See Anton Dolin and Kay Hunter, *Last Words: a Final Autobiography* (London: Century, 1985).

<sup>11</sup>Peter Williams, ‘Curtain Up!’ *Dance and Dancers* 7, no. 11 (November 1956): 24.

<sup>12</sup>Catriona Kelly and David Sheperd, *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution 1881–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>13</sup>Eric J. Hobsbawm, *L’âge des Extrêmes, Histoire du Court XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Complexe, 1994), 312.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Griffith, ‘The Cultural Turn in the Cold War Studies’, *Reviews in American History* 29, no. 1 (March 2001): 150–7.

<sup>15</sup>Victoria Phillips Geduld, ‘Dancing Diplomacy: Martha Graham and the Strange Commodity of Cold-War Cultural Exchange in Asia, 1955 and 1974’, *Dance Chronicle* 33, no. 1 (2010): 44–81.

<sup>16</sup>Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export, Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>Phillips Geduld, ‘Dancing Diplomacy’, 44–81.

<sup>18</sup>Clare Croft, ‘Ballet Nations: The New York City Ballet’s 1962 US State Department-Sponsored Tour of the Soviet Union’, *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 3 (October 2009): 421–42; Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2015).

<sup>19</sup>Catherine Gunther Kodat, *Don’t Act, Just Dance, The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup>David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

little attention has yet been paid to the Soviet point of view, although Cadra Peterson McDaniel did examine the Bolshoi Ballet's first tour to the USA in 1958.<sup>21</sup> Christina Ezrahi's work also points to the complex links between Russian and Soviet ballet within the USSR itself.<sup>22</sup> Based on Soviet sources, Ezrahi devoted a whole chapter to the Bolshoi's 1956 London tour.<sup>23</sup> Here, based on British archive material, I shall look at the British side of the negotiations, an episode of micro-history within the bigger Cold War picture. With so few publications on Cold War ballet tours, I aim to shed light on cultural diplomacy during the Cold War period.

A number of clichés unfortunately surround ballet, the first being that it is by and for elites. As a theatrical form, it emerged from the Italian and French courts, and was thus closely associated with power and propaganda, as one sees from Louis XIV.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, after the Second World War, thanks to worldwide tours by the *Ballets Russes* in the interwar period, ballet schools opened throughout the West.<sup>25</sup> The Soviets themselves helped to popularise the art, by performing in big venues such as Sport Palaces in Western Europe and offering cheap tickets from the 1950s onwards.<sup>26</sup> Another cliché is the frail ballerina in her fluffy tutu. As it happens, years of bone-grinding daily practice lie behind the stage performer. Through the countless meetings, visits, and press conferences with the Soviet dancers in London, the West met Soviets with a human face, masters of a refined but very physical art form, and one that has the advantage of being non-verbal and thus accessible to everyone – the ideal diplomatic export product. Another cliché concerns the Cold War defectors, generally presented by the media in a romantic light, such as the famous Rudolf Nureyev who defected from the USSR whilst in France (1961) or Mikhail Baryshnikov who defected whilst in Canada (1974). Here, I shall be considerably less romantic, in studying how the 1956 tour was finalised, the behind-the-scenes negotiations, and the actors involved.

To grasp the British point of view, in addition to the British press, I have consulted a number of archives, including British diplomatic archives (Foreign Office [FO], British Council) and those of the Royal Opera House (Minutes of the Board and Ballet Committee) and Royal Academy of Dance. I shall be setting out the tour's chronology for diplomatic negotiations, logistics, political impact, and popular and artistic reception, and point to how mundane organisational matters took on huge importance against a background of the early Cold War. Dance and politics intertwine, with all the shocks and strains of political events. Beyond the Cold War's State-to-State relationships, the dancers proved to be true cultural and political ambassadors.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American–Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>22</sup>Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin, Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup>Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 137–68.

<sup>24</sup>See for instance, the first section of Marion Kant, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6–52. On ballet and politics, see Alexandra Kolb, ed., *Dance and Politics* (Bern: Pieter Lang, 2011); Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on Dance and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>25</sup>Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup>Simon Morrison, *Bolshoi Confidential, Secrets of the Russian Ballet from the Rule of the Tsars to Today* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), 348.

<sup>27</sup>Federico Romero, 'Cold War Historiography at the Crossroads,' *Cold War History* 14, no. 4 (2004): 685–703.

## Negotiations open: the principle of reciprocity

Although the idea of a Soviet/British ballet exchange originated in 1944, and had originally been planned for the reopening of Covent Garden in 1946, formal negotiations opened following the Geneva summit.<sup>28</sup> However, given post-war disruption to transport and increasing East-West tension, the Arts Committee of the Council of Peoples' Commissars of the USSR declined the invitation, although the ties were never totally broken.<sup>29</sup> In November 1953, thanks to friendship societies, Soviet ballet dancers toured the United Kingdom during British-Soviet Friendship Month.<sup>30</sup> This led to Foreign Office concerns about communist propaganda.<sup>31</sup>

Between the 1953 tour and the 1956 tour at issue here, other Soviet companies travelled to London: the Soviet Army Ensemble; the Beryozka and Moiseyev folk-dance troupes; and so on. British balletomanes had become acquainted with Soviet artists, choreography, and aesthetics. Since the late 1930s, *The Dancing Times* and other magazines published regular accounts by dance critics such as W.G. Raffé, who in 1936 visited the USSR, which he saw as a place of 'pilgrimage' for the ballet world.<sup>32</sup> Since 1945, books on the Soviet ballet began to appear in English, and there were broadcasts with the great Soviet star Galina Ulanova (1910–98) in the United Kingdom.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, some critics insisted that Soviet choreography had 'stagnated because it was denied the influence of Diaghilev's choreographers', and the *Ballets Russes* experience of the 1920s, unknown to the USSR.<sup>34</sup> All this built up great expectations in London about the Bolshoi Ballet.

For the 1956 tour, the British government deliberately sidelined the friendship societies, preferring to foster high-level dialogue, and thereby making the tour highly political – an official bilateral diplomatic exchange. 'Undesirable agents' were very undesirable indeed, i.e. both communist groups as well as private impresarios were seen as 'a real danger'.<sup>35</sup> At the time, Victor Hochhauser was already a major private impresario, who continues, to this day, to organise British tours for Russian artists.<sup>36</sup> As for David Webster, director of Covent Garden, he was determined to see his institution act as the Soviet negotiators' main interlocutor. Webster (1903–71) was a key player in London's cultural life after World War II. A former amateur actor and theatre director, Webster gained experience leading the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra during the war, and then helped reopen Covent Garden in 1946, thanks to his vast network of contacts. He went on to lead the Royal Opera House

<sup>28</sup>See *Visit to United Kingdom of Russian State Ballet, 1945*, FO371/47953, TNA.

<sup>29</sup>Another private invitation, by Major Leith-Hay-Clark, was rejected by the Foreign Office (hereafter FO) as too commercial.

<sup>30</sup>Lorraine Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers: Dance and British Cold War Politics in the Early 1950s', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 19, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 83–105; *Visit to UK of Soviet Woodworkers; British-Soviet Friendship Society Plans for 1953; Visit of Soviet Cultural Delegation; Soviet Artists' Concert Tour*, Northern Department (Dpt), 'Soviet Artists Proceeding on a Concert tour of the United Kingdom', 28 October 1953, FO371/106582, TNA.

<sup>31</sup>Letter from A.A.F. Haigh, FO, to Lord Talbot de Malahide, Security Dpt, 29 October 1953, FO371/106582, TNA.

<sup>32</sup>W.G. Raffé, 'We Went to Russia: Our Pilgrimage', *The Dancing Times* (August 1936): 485–7.

<sup>33</sup>Iris Morley, *Soviet Ballet* (London: Collins, 1945); Iris Morley, 'Romeo and Juliet' in Moscow, *Ballet* 4, no. 2 (August 1947): 19–24; Iris Morley and Phyllis Winifred Manchester, *The Rose and The Star: Ballet in England and Soviet Compared* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1949); Lorraine Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers', 84.

<sup>34</sup>Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers', 88. For the *Ballets Russes*, see Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989).

<sup>35</sup>*Exchange visit of Sadler's Wells Ballet and the Bolshoi Theatre co.*, 1955–1956, Letter from Webster to Miss Richardson, Cultural Relations Department, FO, 12 December 1955, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>36</sup>Nicholas Wroe, 'Victor Hochhauser: My Great Stroke of Luck Came when Stalin Died', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jul/17/victor-hochhauser-impresario/> (accessed 14 December 2016).

for 25 years.<sup>37</sup> To Webster, Hochhauser was a rival both artistic and financial, whereas he intended Covent Garden to become the showcase for Great Britain, with the Bolshoi tour helping to consolidate that project.

On 28 July 1955, the Soviet Embassy in London responded by letter, confirming the possibility of a Bolshoi Ballet tour, and proposing performances of *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*, *Coppélia*, *Don Quixote*, *Romeo and Juliet*, 'and others', by '30 to 40 dancers for 15 to 20 days'.<sup>38</sup> In early August 1955, Webster met with British Council officials to begin concretising the tour, which was finally approved at a meeting between Webster and the Soviet diplomat Timofeev on 12 August 1955.<sup>39</sup> By the end of summer 1955, the players on the British side had been defined: the Royal Opera House; the British Council and its new Soviet Relations Committee directed by Christopher Mahew, a Labour politician; the FO; and the British Embassy in Moscow.<sup>40</sup> On the Soviet side, the Bolshoi Ballet and Soviet Embassy in London were the main interlocutors, in constant contact with the Moscow authorities and notably the Ministry of Culture.

The negotiations rested on the reciprocity principle, a usual practice in Cold War exchanges: the Bolshoi Ballet would tour to London, the Sadler's Wells to Moscow. Webster, determined to project a positive image of the British troupe in the USSR, wanted to have it perform, not the classics – where the Soviets were deemed to excel – but modern pieces, as suggested by the British Council's *Drama Advisory Panel*, bearing in mind that American ballet was then in its infancy.<sup>41</sup> Given Covent Garden's already heavy schedule, there was a slowdown between the autumn of 1955 and the spring of 1956; Webster twice delayed the exchange for planning reasons.<sup>42</sup> At last the organisational mechanics – defining repertoire, logistics for the sets, music, costumes, and cast – were put into motion early in 1956. The Soviet government and Royal Opera House agreed that the tour would be launched by late summer or early autumn 1956.<sup>43</sup>

## Organising the Soviet tour and the British return tour

### *Material aspects*

Talks between the two countries on the material aspects of the tour actually started in May 1956, just after the Bulganin/Khrushchev visit, starting with transportation, a vexed issue since both the British and Soviet companies would have to rely upon Pall Mall Deposit and Forwarding Co. Ltd. The British company was itself dependent on decisions by the Soviet authorities, who set customs and transport tariffs on their territory. Not a detail could be overlooked, right down to booking special sealed railway carriages to protect sets and costumes from snow between the boat and the theatre. Gerson, who ran Pall Mall Deposit and Forwarding, had lived through a 'fairy tale situation' in November 1955, when Peter

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<sup>37</sup>Frances Donaldson, *The Royal Opera House in the XX Century* (London: Bloomsbury Reader, 2011), 84–6; Haltrecht Montague, *The Quiet Showman: Sir David Webster and the Royal Opera House* (London: Collins, 1975).

<sup>38</sup>Letter by H. Belokhovostikov, Soviet Embassy in London, 28 July 1955, 2 (author's translation), BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>39</sup>Note on Timofeev/Webster meeting, 12 August 1955, Working Party, Soviet Relations Committee, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>40</sup>Michael J. Turner, *British Power and International Relations During the 1950s, A Tenable Position?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 191; Draft minutes, Soviet Relations Committee Working Party, 5 September 1955, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>41</sup>Note on a conversation with Webster, British Council, USSR/42/2, BW64/30, TNA; Jessica Zeller, *Shapes of American Ballet, Teachers and Training before Balanchine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>42</sup>USSR/42/2, 1, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>43</sup>USSR/42/2, 1, BW64/30, TNA and Minutes, Soviet Relations Committee Working Party, 4 November 1955, §9.

Brook toured *Hamlet* in the USSR.<sup>44</sup> It was the first tour by an English troupe to the USSR since the Bolshevik Revolution and one set up with minimal intervention from the FO and British Council.<sup>45</sup> Although *Hamlet* was well received and played to sold-out theatres, its British organisers had nightmarish problems on tour, mainly with moving the scenery, and in 1956, no one looked forward to another round.<sup>46</sup> Anticipating a worst-case scenario, the British Council selected Pall Mall Deposit and Forwarding Co. Ltd. owing to its previous experience. Only belatedly – May 1956 – and following much negotiation over customs duties, were concrete figures for costs defined, including salaries, freight and passenger transport, accommodation, meals, per diems, and so on.<sup>47</sup>

Personal relationships and field visits were fundamental and ensured the tour's success. Shashkin, the Bolshoi's Deputy Director, visited London in late May 1956.<sup>48</sup> He was accompanied by Slavnov, the Deputy Culture Minister, which placed the visit onto the highest official level.<sup>49</sup> The agenda was a concrete one, and dealt more especially with publicity: the Soviet officials explained that a booklet presenting the Soviet dancers would be issued, drafted by the Bolshoi Theatre, and published in English. The Soviets stressed at the outset that they had no interest in 'making profit' on the booklet.<sup>50</sup> This apparently anecdotal aspect of the negotiations defined the Soviet stance as an artistic and political, rather than a commercial, one, and that was indeed part of their strategy. In July 1956, the Bolshoi Theatre forwarded to the Royal Opera House something like 500 photographs including portraits of the entire troupe, the conductor, and administrators.<sup>51</sup> There were shots of costumed dancers backstage and on stage, and members of the troupe in 'civvies' at a dacha in Serebryany Bor.<sup>52</sup> Based on these documents, Covent Garden wrote up programmes and circulated them very widely through press agencies and newspapers. The Bolshoi's administration lost no opportunity to present the 'human side' of Soviet citizens, and thus offset anti-Soviet propaganda.

Although Covent Garden's officials spoke well overall of the Bolshoi, much could and did go wrong with organisational matters for the tour, the first on such a huge scale.<sup>53</sup> As seen, it relied on the reciprocity principle, which implies strict balance. For example, in 1955, negotiators had agreed that each delegation would be roughly 100 strong.<sup>54</sup> But by late July 1956, the Bolshoi Ballet announced 50 extra members of the delegation, so as to present the entire troupe, an announcement which upset the balance and in fact jeopardised the tour owing to the much smaller Covent Garden stage, relative to the Bolshoi. Ultimately,

<sup>44</sup>Letter by Henri S.A. Gerson, Pall Mall to Covent Garden, 7 May 1956, 1, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>45</sup>'Reports on activities,' April 1955 to December 1956, §14, Anglo-Soviet cultural relations, Reports on activities of Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council, 1957, FO924/1209, TNA.

<sup>46</sup>Manon Van de Water, *Moscow Theatre for Young People: a Cultural History of Ideological Coercion and Artistic Innovation, 1917–2000* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 68.

<sup>47</sup>Internal British Council note, Drama Dpt to Controller, Arts and Science, 29 May 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>48</sup>Internal British Council note, Drama Dpt to Controller, Arts and Science, 29 May 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>49</sup>Letter by the British Embassy in Moscow to Northern Dpt, FO, 4 July 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>50</sup>Internal British Council note, Drama Dpt to Controller, Arts and Science, 6 June 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>51</sup>Artists photographs, Ballet/dance troupes other than Covent Garden, Bolshoi Ballet, 1956/1957, 1956, Royal Opera House Collections (ROHC).

<sup>52</sup>A small country house reserved for Bolshoi artists. Serebryany Bor lies about 10 kilometres west of Moscow on the Moskva River, and is surrounded by forests. The Soviet artists were portrayed in this relaxed and rural setting, with Ulanova at her knitting and Plisetskaya fishing, wearing a jumper and velvet trousers.

<sup>53</sup>*The Dancing Times* (November 1956): 64.

<sup>54</sup>Letter by the Director, Drama Department, British Council to Controller of Arts and Sciences, British Council, 6 June 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

the British Council managed to accommodate the 50 extra dancers when the USSR agreed to cover the costs.<sup>55</sup>

### **Cost sharing**

'Who pays?'<sup>56</sup> The question, raised by the British Council, was fundamental, and dictated the structure and negotiations. At a decisive meeting held on 12 August 1955, Timofeev, third secretary of the Soviet Embassy, and Webster discussed the financial aspects, eventually securing an agreement.<sup>57</sup> The list below shows the extent to which every single item, every participant, was counted so as to ensure a fair exchange. Covent Garden covered the cost of moving sets and costumes from London to Leningrad by boat, costs for 100 people in London (accommodation, meals, £100 per diem per head, salaries for the orchestra and extra Covent Garden staff, advertising, wages for the 100-strong Sadler's Wells delegation in Moscow; advertising, taxes, insurance, and overheads for the Moscow tour, Moscow/London airfare for the British troupe, and returning the latter's sets and costumes from Leningrad to London). For their part, the Soviets agreed to pay round-trip airfare for 150 Bolshoi delegation members, moving sets and costumes from Leningrad to London and back, costs for the aforesaid 50 extra Bolshoi delegation members (accommodation, meals), moving the Sadler's Wells costumes from Leningrad back to London, accommodation and meals for 100 people in Moscow, a per diem of 1000 roubles each for 100 people plus all orchestral and theatre fees in Moscow.

Although the discussion was protracted owing to routine issues within each opera house, the machine regained momentum three months before the event. On 27 July 1956, David Webster and his Assistant John Tooley issued a double progress report to Chulaki. There were outstanding issues which led to some misunderstandings: the technicians' arrival date for example, or the exact number of dancers and technicians coming. The upstream organisation was still at loose ends – booking hotels, arranging four meals a day including tea, work visas, and rehearsals. More technical questions such as converting roubles posed a problem for Covent Garden: reciprocity in currency matters was impossible, as only the rouble could circulate in the USSR.<sup>58</sup> After months of negotiation, it was decided to have the roubles remain on a Moscow account, to be used for British artists in general. Such financial issues were to be recurring throughout all cultural negotiations with the USSR.<sup>59</sup>

### **Programme and tickets in London**

The British Council's Soviet Relations Committee, which handled everything that was to take place outside Covent Garden as such, set up a programme of leisure outings for the Soviets, aimed at projecting a particular image of the United Kingdom:

It is obviously desirable that Soviet personnel coming over here should go home with an impression that this is a great nation wishing to be friendly and with a live contribution to the world of today. It is further desirable that they should not come under the influence of

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<sup>55</sup>Letter by Webster to Stephen Thomas, British Council, 19 July 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>56</sup>Meeting, 24 July 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>57</sup>Note on Timofeev/Webster meeting, Soviet Relations Committee, 12 August 1955, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>58</sup>Note by Webster to Chulaki, 27 July 1956, 6; Soviet Relations Committee Minutes, Working Party, 7th meeting, 7 August 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>59</sup>Reports on activities, April 1955 to December 1956, FO924/1209, TNA.

communistic and other organisations with pretensions to an importance in Great Britain which is far from being the case.<sup>60</sup>

A positive, modern, and democratic image was to be presented to the Soviet delegation to counterbalance anti-capitalist Soviet propaganda. Lieutenant General Sir Kenneth Morley Loch (1890–1961), the British Council's Controller of Arts and Sciences from 1950 to 1958, specified that 'no communist or 'unwanted associations' must interfere in the preparations.<sup>61</sup>

Thanks to British Council and Royal Opera House archives and to the press, the programme can be precisely reconstructed: one finds the company at a grand flower-bedecked reception thrown by England's leading dancers and the Royal Opera House on the first day; a grand dinner for the two troupes after the premiere with Embassy officials and artists; a breakfast event for the entire Bolshoi provided by the Mayor of London; an informal cocktail party for the Soviet and English troupes and staff; a visit to the Tate; to Stratford-upon-Avon to see a play; to tourist sites – Windsor, Eton, the Tower of London, and Parliament.<sup>62</sup> London was of course the focal point, with cultural visits and official receptions as one would expect in diplomacy. The Soviet dancers came in the guise of Soviet citizens, tourists, and cultural messengers.

Ticket-booking arrangements were strict: only postal bookings were allowed, and on a strictly first-come-first served basis, with no more than two tickets issued for the same performance. For the premiere, spectators were cautiously assigned tickets by lottery! For the remainder of the performances, Covent Garden issued each spectator no more than 12 tickets overall, and no more than four tickets per performance. This served to manage the flow of spectators and limit black-marketeers, which Covent Garden and the British Council were concerned to prevent. Balletomanes camped outside Covent Garden for three days and three nights.<sup>63</sup> Euphoria reigned, and the city cheered the Soviet dancers until a sudden turn of events occurred: the case of 'Nina's five hats'.

### The obstacle thrown up by the Ponomareva case

At 5:20 pm on 29 August, Thomas Brimelow, who headed the FO's Northern Department, received a phone call. Kolovin, First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, and his colleague Ippolitov wished to talk to him urgently: the Soviet discus thrower Nina Ponomareva (1929–2016), in London for an international sports event, had been arrested on Oxford Street for stealing five hats in a C&A.<sup>64</sup> Although Ponomareva, backed by the Soviet Embassy, denied the allegations, the C&A's security staff insisted on their veracity. The athlete was to face a magistrate the following day.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Kenneth Loch, 'Entertainment of Soviet manifestations in this Country,' Soviet Relations Committee, Working Party, 2 August 1956, 2, 3. BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>61</sup>Kenneth Loch, 'Entertainment of Soviet Manifestations in this Country,' Soviet Relations Committee, Working Party, 2 August 1956, 2, 3. BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>62</sup>Note by Jane Edgeworth, Drama Dpt, 9 November 1960; Note from Miss Norton to Bolshoi Ballet, visit to the House of Parliament, 18 October 1956, BW64/30, TNA. Only 60 to 75 individuals took part in the visit.

<sup>63</sup>'All-night Bolshoi Queue,' *Guardian*, 20 October 1956, Bolshoi 1956 Press Cuttings Album, ROHC.

<sup>64</sup>Note by Brimelow, 30 August 1956 and Police Report, *N. Ponomareva, a member of the Soviet athletic team visiting London, has been charged with shoplifting*, 30 August 1956, FO371/122983, TNA.

<sup>65</sup>'Warrant out for Russian Woman Athlete,' *Evening Standard*, 30 August 1956 and Note by Thomas Brimelow, 'Nina Ponomareva,' 31 August 1956, 2, FO371/122983, TNA.

The Ponomareva case found its way into the world's press just a few short weeks before the Bolshoi's tour was to open.<sup>66</sup> American Ballet Theatre's Manager reported back from his troupe's European tour: 'I will write next time from Yugoslavia. I hope that none of our girls will be arrested for stealing hats in Belgrade.'<sup>67</sup> As the case blew up into a diplomatic incident, a British Embassy official in Moscow, recalling how the Bolshoi's tour to Paris in 1954 had been nipped in the bud, wrote:

I think we can safely ignore the clumsy hint of blackmail in regard to the visit of the Bolshoi Ballet. I do not think even the Soviet government is likely to cut off its nose to spite its face quite to this extent, especially after the fiasco of the Bolshoi visit to Paris. But no doubt they will try to keep us on tenterhooks until the last minute.<sup>68</sup>

The Soviet camp was not in fact holding the whip hand here. In May 1954, a first attempt to send a Soviet ballet troupe on tour to Paris had ended in a fiasco, as the dancers were packed off to the USSR before any performances could be held. The background was of course the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu – indirectly supported by the USSR – where hundreds of French soldiers died at the hands of Vietnamese forces. As French veterans of Indochina threatened to disrupt the Paris tour, it became 'L'Affaire des Ballets Soviétiques'.<sup>69</sup> The Bolshoi tour to London was consequently critical to East-West relations, signalling the two countries' acknowledgement of each other when it came to cultural matters, enabling the USSR to assert its cultural model abroad in a major centre and putting London into the foreground as a tranquil playing field for the profession.

On 12 September, Andrei Gromyko, formerly ambassador to London (1952–1953), Communist Party Central Committee member, and acting minister of foreign affairs, met with British diplomats in Moscow and threatened to cancel the Bolshoi tour. Unruffled, the Foreign Office merely found the blackmail 'deplorable': 'Gromyko [...] seems to do it with some caution' – and Anglo-Soviet cultural relations carried on.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, on 21 September, the London Philharmonic Orchestra arrived at Moscow for its inaugural concert. With a 'friendly' Soviet Minister of Culture in attendance, Soviet artists were wary of the British Ambassador. And on that very day, Galina Ulanova and several other Bolshoi dancers had a letter published in *Izvestia*, suggesting that the London tour might have to be struck, unless Nina were freed.

Under the circumstances, the visit of the Bolshoi Theatre Ballet cannot be realised. We declare we cannot allow that any one member of our troupe be exposed to the danger of any provocation. Therefore, we suggest that under these circumstances, the ballet troupe cannot go to London.<sup>71</sup>

That letter – four or so pages long – was circulated by the Russian news agency TASS and then by Reuters, as well as being published in the British press. According to press reports, the Bolshoi's sets and costumes, sent out ahead of time, were blocked in London's harbour until further notice. Christopher Mayhew, head of the Soviet Relations Committee, fearing the affair would harm the relations he had tried to build up since 1955, contacted Anthony

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<sup>66</sup> counted 14 articles in the *New York Times* between 30 August and 14 October 1956.

<sup>67</sup>American Ballet Theatre records, European tour, correspondence, 31 August 1956, 32/3064, New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division (hereafter NYPL-JRDD).

<sup>68</sup>Letter by Sir Hayter, British Embassy in Moscow to FO, 3 September 1956, FO371/122983, TNA.

<sup>69</sup>Henri Marqué, 'L'affaire des ballets soviétiques', *Paris-Presse l'intransigeant*, 13 May 1954, 1.

<sup>70</sup>Telegram no. 1253 from Moscow to London, 12 September 1956, FO371/122984, TNA.

<sup>71</sup>'No London Visit by Bolshoi Ballet', *Times*, 21 September 1956, NS1804/28, FO371/122984, TNA.

Nutting, then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, to deplore – off the record – the Soviets’ ‘stupidity’.<sup>72</sup>

Ponomareva had still not appeared in Court by 27 September when, at a Moscow reception for the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the outcome of several weeks’ negotiations, the Soviet minister of culture emphasised the two countries’ friendship. At the reception, some Bolshoi dancers conversed with the British Ambassador, and were found to have changed tack relative to the aforesaid letter of protest. Principal dancer Raissa Struchkova was not alone in believing the tour would go on. The atmosphere was more ‘frank and relaxed than usual’; alcohol flowed freely and, according to an off-the-record remark from Soviet diplomat Andrei Stepanov, things would shortly be back on track.<sup>73</sup> The British ambassador concluded that not only Mikhailov, the minister of culture, a fervent supporter of artistic exchanges, but Khrushchev and Bulganin themselves, must have taken the matter directly in hand since a few hours later, the Russian Ministry of Aviation commandeered three *Tupolev* 104s for the troupe.<sup>74</sup> On 29 September, and just one month after Ponomareva’s arrest, 16 people, including Bolshoi Director Chulaki, left for London.<sup>75</sup>

The Russian archives point to the significant role played by Chulaki, negotiating directly with the Soviet Minister of Culture, in the decision to tour despite the Ponomareva case. Following the Paris uproar in 1954, another cancellation was unthinkable.<sup>76</sup> And so the Ballet’s arrival was officially announced for 1 October 1956 as thick fog engulfed London’s airport. For unspecified reasons, the Immigration Officers were late.<sup>77</sup> After months of negotiations, could an entire planeload of Soviet dancers have been forgotten? The first group waited two hours on board before being invited to delicately place a foot in the ‘free world’. Accompanying the artists and technicians were Deputy Minister of Culture Pakhomov and eight Ministry of Higher Education officials. As for the *prima ballerina* Galina Ulanova, her status was that of a high-ranking civil servant; carrying aloft the flame of Soviet culture, she was treated as though she were formally a diplomat and indeed, Ulanova stands proudly in the foreground of the first official photograph taken on the tarmac.<sup>78</sup> The younger Maya Plisetskaya did not travel to London since it was feared she would defect, and Ulanova had thus to bear the full brunt of responsibility.<sup>79</sup>

### The Bolshoi Ballet in London: a popular and artistic success under control

Throughout the four-week tour, the dancers were on a very tight schedule of rehearsals, press conferences, official meetings, visits, and performances, all the more so that a week’s rehearsals had been lost owing to the Ponomareva case. There was thus but a single rehearsal prior to the première, which lasted a full 18 hours from 2 October to the next day’s premiere, thus disrupting the Covent Garden technicians’ work. Despite the many extra hours it took

<sup>72</sup>Confidential Note from Christopher Mayhew to Secretary of State, 26 September 1956, FO371/122984, TNA.

<sup>73</sup>Telegram no. 1315, from British Embassy in Moscow to FO, London, 28 September 1956, FO371/122984, TNA.

<sup>74</sup>Telegram no. 1315, from British Embassy in Moscow to FO, London, 28 September 1956, FO371/122984, TNA.

<sup>75</sup>For a detailed chronology of the crisis and its resolution, see Edelman, *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 147.

<sup>77</sup>Margot Fonteyn, 156.

<sup>78</sup>Barratt’s photo press, London, photography no 662018-A, Ballet/dance companies other than Covent Garden, Bolshoi Ballet 1956/1957, ROHC and a Pathé News clip, ‘Arrival of the Bolshoi,’ *British Pathé*, (1956), 4’11”, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/arrival-of-bolshoi-ballet/query/bolshoi+ballet/> (accessed 12 December 2016).

<sup>79</sup>Despite long negotiations by the Royal Opera House, Maya Plisetskaya is not authorised to tour abroad. See Maya Plisetskaya, *I, Maya Plisetskaya* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001).

for the dancers to cope with the much smaller Covent Garden stage, leisure outings stayed on the agenda: a crucial opportunity for communication and image-building on both sides.

The Foreign Office scrutinised the delegation's every move. London's temptations and pleasures proved irresistible to the Soviet dancers. Granted a per diem for personal use, they went shopping – and especially for fur coats. Soviet Embassy officials accompanied them to an Oxford Street shop, Alberta Furs. But a few days later, some dancers complained to the interpreter Mrs Gavrilovich about the coats' poor quality. Although she advised them to return to the shop, her advice was ignored as the Soviet dancers were not accustomed to such behaviour, nor had the Soviet Embassy advised it. To do so would directly challenge the officials. That being said, the FO wanted no problems, however small, during the tour. Any incident might prove disruptive and the FO intended neither to see a repeat of the Ponomareva affair, nor to be criticised for neglecting the dancers' wellbeing. Moreover fur coats, being fashionable garb, were a showcase for British expertise and would doubtless be carried back to the USSR. A British Council note dated 26 October was circulated internally.<sup>80</sup> One of the five coats 'disintegrated', and the purchaser was refunded. Any unwanted politics was to be avoided. For example, the dancers were invited to watch Arthur Miller's 'famous "A View from the Bridge" on 10 October. The British Council told Webster that it was hoped the play would be 'completely non-political'.<sup>81</sup>

At the end of the day though, the tour was not just tourism, shopping, or diplomatic tensions. It was artistic, and to a very high degree. The Bolshoi performed 25 times between 3 October and 29 October 1956.<sup>82</sup> Four ballets were performed, to reflect the Bolshoi's repertoire as one rooted both in Russian and in Soviet history.<sup>83</sup> *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* represented the classical repertoire, while the *dramballets* *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* were very contemporary. There was a great deal of pantomime in the latter two narrative ballets, in a typical Soviet style widespread from the 1930s to the early 1950s. Soviet pantomime gesture had evolved on the basis of Stanislavsky's naturalistic principles. The ballet followed the story so closely that even the most general public could readily follow. Lavrovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* (music by Prokofiev) is of course a re-enactment of Shakespeare's play, allowing the Soviet theatre to present itself as a link in the chain of British, and international, theatre. The dancing was classical yet with a Russian twist and pantomime: strong backs, a lot of magnificent *pas de deux* with lifts, Lavrovsky saying it was 'fusion of dance with mime'.<sup>84</sup> Zakharov's *Fountain* – based on Pushkin's poem and first seen in 1934 – had been hugely successful in the USSR; the British critics considered it to be the perfect *dramballet*, integrating virtuoso dancing with dramatic expression. Taking place in Crimea, with rich oriental costumes, the ballet showed moments of character dances, with two female heroines on stage: 'Maria, dancing low arabesques and soft lines, Zarema making proud poses and wild leaps'.<sup>85</sup> *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* are of course full-length classical ballets;

<sup>80</sup>Bolshoi Ballet Fur Coats; from Byrne to Mc Gregor, 2 November 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>81</sup>Letter by British Council to David Webster, 1 October 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>82</sup>Royal Opera House Collections, Programme available online, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/royalopera-house/28125786044/> (accessed 16 November 2016).

<sup>83</sup>'Contemporary Arts', *Spectator*, 12 October 1956, 20, online, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/12th-October-1956/20/contemporary-arts/> (accessed 16 November 2016).

<sup>84</sup>Zoe Anderson, *The Ballet Lover's Companion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 195. British choreographers such as John Cranko and Kenneth MacMillan were later influenced by this Soviet version for their own ballet. See Anderson, *Ballet Lover's Companion*, 196.

<sup>85</sup>Anderson, *Ballet Lover's Companion*, 189; see *The Fountain of Bakchisarai* 1953, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NINj0vpJqdQ> (accessed 24 December 2017). In this film, Ulanova and Plisetskaya are dancing together.

performed in the Russian imperial theatres, they had vanished after the Revolution, only to return fairly recently to the Soviet stage.<sup>86</sup> The Sadler's Wells Ballet had presented excerpts from *Giselle* in 1946, and excerpts from *Swan Lake* in 1950; now the Bolshoi would enable the British public to compare the two schools.

Londoners turned out en masse – 50,000 to 55,000 spectators for the 25 sold-out performances.<sup>87</sup> Black-market ticket sales drew much attention from the press: the box-office rule restricting each spectator to 12 tickets – a rather large number – had in fact helped fuel the black market. At the last moment, three extra performances were given at the 3500-seat Davis Theatre in Croydon: four times as many people queued as managed to buy tickets, and the queue formed before four in the morning.<sup>88</sup> Margot Fonteyn reports on the first-night fever thusly:

... no moment of the Bolshoi performance on 3rd October 1956 has been dislodged from my memory. There was great excitement as the audience took their seats. People up in the gallery had actually queued for tickets for three days and four nights. In the tiers and in the stalls were women in long evening gowns, their jewels gleaming across the house as the dimming lights caught heads turning towards the heavy velvet curtains. The conductor raised his baton, there was an instant of bated breath and then, with the first bars, the velvets swung open and we were transported into that incredible evocation of rich, Renaissance, provincial life; of stupid family feuds and bawdy servants; of hot-tempered youths and hapless young lovers, enmeshed, like innocent birds, in their tragedy.<sup>89</sup>

Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister, attended the premiere in a theatre packed to the rafters.<sup>90</sup> The Opéra's ex-Ballet Master Serge Lifar – he had resigned but the day before – travelled from Paris, as did other French dancers and members of the New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre's ongoing European tours.<sup>91</sup> The Bolshoi tour received extensive press coverage.<sup>92</sup> At 11:30 pm that night, once the performance ended, a large on-stage reception was held for the Soviet dancers. Waiters in formal dress poured champagne, as knots of people surrounded around the Soviet dancers, trying to speak with them, interpreter or no interpreter.

If the Soviets had hoped for a popular triumph, they were not disappointed. As for Galina Ulanova, she was the very incarnation of the Bolshoi's impact.<sup>93</sup> Forty-six years of age – older than most of the world's leading ballerinas – her qualities as an artist and human being struck the British as exceptional and unconventional. Ezrahi has described the toll the tours took, especially on Ulanova, who suffered from injury and fatigue.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, on returning to Moscow, she suffered a serious calf injury. At London, Ulanova danced six performances

<sup>86</sup>Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 167–8.

<sup>87</sup>'What the Bolshoi Means to Covent Garden,' *Times*, 26 October 1956, 3; Peter Brinson, 'The Bolshoi Ballet Backstage,' *The Observer*, 28 October 1956.

<sup>88</sup>'Visit to be Extended. Three Evenings at Croydon Theatre,' *The Times*, 13 October 1956, 8; 'All-Night Queue for Ballet Tickets,' *Times*, 20 October 1956, 6.

<sup>89</sup>Margot Fonteyn, 156–7.

<sup>90</sup>Peter Williams, 'Watch the Russians,' *Dance and Dancers* 7, no. 10 (October 1956): 5.

<sup>91</sup>Olivier Merlin, 'La première du Bolchoï à Covent Garden,' *Le Monde*, 5 October 1956; 'The Sitter Out,' *The Dancing Times* (November 1956): 63.

<sup>92</sup>'London Acclaims Bolshoi's "Romeo,"' *New York Times*, 3 October 1956, 29; 'Soviet Ballet on Way,' *New York Times*, 30 September 1956, 4; 'Bolshoi Dancers Arrive in London,' *New York Times*, 2 October 1956, 38; Olivier Merlin, 'La première du Bolchoï à Covent Garden,' *Le Monde*, 5 October 1956; 'Galina Ulanova chez la Pavlova,' *France-Soir*, 20 October 1956.

<sup>93</sup>Ioulia Bolchakova, 'Galina Ulanova, symbole du ballet russe et de la dissonance cognitive soviétique,' in Cécile Vaissé, ed., *La fabrique de l'Homme nouveau après Staline : les arts et la culture dans le projet soviétique* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016).

<sup>94</sup>Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 143–4; 'Ulanova Collapses on Moscow Stage,' *New York Times*, 18 November 1956, 87.

of *Romeo and Juliet*, a role, and a ballet, she had already made world-famous – plus Act II of *Swan Lake*, and 13 performances of *Giselle*. This was three times more than the Bolshoi's Executive Director had asked of the Ministry of Culture. In any event, her superiority was patent, and widely acknowledged not only in the newspapers and ballet journals, but by the British dancers themselves.<sup>95</sup>

During her first appearance, Ulanova, in the role of Juliet, revealed that she is a top dancer; amid riots and debacles while cavorting and duels, she was undoubtedly one of the very greatest dancers of our time. At the age when most ballerinas are retired, she has mastered the art, which allows her to create the perfect theatrical illusion – it is Juliet, not the performer of Juliet, and her dance converts a simple choreography into a moving theatrical event.<sup>96</sup>

The British public too were discovering Ulanova and the Soviet ballet. On 21 October, Act II of *Swan Lake* was broadcast on the BBC and watched by 9.5 million spectators.<sup>97</sup> Although but one-third of British homes then had television, it was to play a significant role in broadening ballet's general appeal.<sup>98</sup>

Overall, the Bolshoi was positively received by the critics, some of whom described the experience as a 'total renewal of the perception of ballet.'<sup>99</sup> The word 'triumph' became a catchphrase for newspapers and ballet journals alike.<sup>100</sup> Although measuring the true impact of such events can be awkward, the tour was not only perceived as 'historical' at the time – its impact was long-term, as one sees from John Percival's article penned in 2006: 'It was one of those rare occasions (like first seeing New York City Ballet in 1950) that gives you a new understanding of what ballet can achieve.' There are countless articles in the same vein, published a full 60 years later during the Bolshoi's London tours of 2010 and 2016.<sup>101</sup> The 45-minute ovation for Ulanova in *Romeo and Juliet* has not been forgotten.

The 1956 tour became a legend and is still held up as the gold standard. The press struggled to find fresh metaphors for the troupe's grandeur.<sup>102</sup> The male dancers' impressive leaps and acrobatic lifts, theretofore unknown in the West, caught the British imagination. Dance critics tended to refer to the troupe as typically Oriental, with its latent eroticism, exotic imagery, and baroque costumes, all qualities that British dancers could scarcely copy: Russian soulfulness as it were.

The breakthrough and the extent of their dance originated in their spine and flowed through their bodies to the ends of their members. It would just be useless for our dancers to copy the external elements of this approach to dance.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>95</sup>Peter Williams, 'Watch the Russians,' *Dance and Dancers* 7, no. 10 (October 1956), 5.

<sup>96</sup>A.V. Coton, 'Greatness of Ulanova,' *Daily Telegraph*, s.d.

<sup>97</sup>Elsa Brunelleschi, 'Ulanova and Fonteyn on Television,' *Dancing Times* (December 1956), 127.

<sup>98</sup>'Television ownership in private domestic households (1956–2013),' *Broadcasters Audience Research Board*, online [www.barb.co.uk](http://www.barb.co.uk) (accessed 9 May 2014). See also, *The Best of the Bolshoi Ballet in London, 1956*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0iF4xlxc7M> (accessed 23 December 2017).

<sup>99</sup>John Percival, 'Bolshoi's Big Bang,' *Independent*, 9 July 2006.

<sup>100</sup>Cyril Aynsley, 'Millions of Hearts Dance with Ulanova,' *Daily Express*, 22 October 1956, 7; Noël Goodwin, 'Poetic Enchantment,' *Daily Express*, no date; A.V. Coton, 'Bolshoi Gives Scintillating "Swan Lake",' *Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 1956; A.V. Coton, 'Greatness of Ulanova,' *The Daily Telegraph*; Sacheverell Sitwell, 'Ulanova's Great Artistry,' *Sunday Times*, 7 October 1956.

<sup>101</sup>Hannah Furness, 'Bolshoi Ballet: "Understudy's understudy" rises to Covent Garden star,' *Telegraph*, 25 July 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/25/bolshoi-ballet-understudys-understudy-rises-to-covent-garden-sta/>, (accessed 28 October 2016).

<sup>102</sup>'And on stage, a Mammoth Murder,' *Daily Express*, 4 October 1956, 4–5; 'Enormous Cast,' in A.V. Coton, 'Greatness of Ulanova,' *The Daily Telegraph*, no date.

<sup>103</sup>Peter Williams, 'After the Party,' *Dance and Dancers* 7, no. 12 (December 1956): 5.

Unlike the general public, the critics were not, however, unanimous. Three were dubious about the troupe's alleged lack of modernity. The USSR had been cut off since 1917: the ballet was conservative; its costumes and decors somewhat musty and dusty. Arnold Haskell declared as much in an article entitled 'The Bolshoi Stuff is Old-Fashioned.'<sup>104</sup> Cyril Beaumont too, in an article dedicated to Ulanova, swam against the tide – he was disappointed and found her overly classical.<sup>105</sup> Goodwin also questioned the lack of novelty: 'Incredible! Superb! But is it really new?' For him, this ballet was fine for 'people at large' but it turned back the clock to 'fifty years ago'. The three critics found there was far too much pantomime; the ballets were either overplayed or overdanced. Goodwin wrote after his first sight of the troupe: 'I was shaking, I was excited and disappointed at the same time.'<sup>106</sup> One finds similar negative, if minority, views expressed everywhere the Bolshoi would perform.

There can be no doubt but that the Bolshoi tour was a tremendous boost both to the Bolshoi, and to the Royal Opera House's prestige. David Webster's influence became 'greater than at any other time since the opening in 1946.'<sup>107</sup> His tireless backstage diplomacy, his catering to the Soviet delegation's every need and to the British Council and Foreign Office's wishes, led the *Daily Mirror* to suggest Webster 'be knighted for patience.'<sup>108</sup>

### **Hungary and the Suez Crisis: a ballet tour in the midst of an international storm**

Despite the 'ballet cliché' – fragile ballerinas in tutus – the paper has shown that ballet can scarcely be described as apolitical. By displaying its virtuoso artists and the expressionist aesthetics of *dramballet*, the USSR made propaganda hay from its 'dancing diplomats'. But Cold War politics was everywhere, and not just in how the human body was presented: it struck the tour. On 4 November, the Bolshoi left London post-haste. The British Council's Kenneth Loch woke Covent Garden's deputy general manager John Tooley, explaining that Chulaki insisted on returning to Moscow that very night.<sup>109</sup> As snow fell on London, no one could see what the urgency might be. However, the British Council chartered a plane forthwith and the troupe flew off – just as Soviet tanks entered Budapest. The dancers had doubtless been told to leave in the night, before the story broke in the world's press.

As it happens, the Hungarian crisis, which coincided with the Suez Crisis, had erupted a fortnight earlier in the midst of the tour. FO documents show how cautiously British diplomacy reacted, although it began to be rumoured that the Sadler's Wells Ballet's Moscow tour – part and parcel of the reciprocal agreement – might be struck.<sup>110</sup> The plan was to have the British tour follow promptly in the wake of the Bolshoi's. When the Red Army actually broke into Budapest however, a decision was taken between 5 November and 7 November. On 6 November, the British Council's Soviet Relations Committee convened in special session.<sup>111</sup> As Kenneth Loch wrote to Mayhew, the return tour was critical from a propaganda standpoint: 'We are taking on the Russians on their own front and one in which

<sup>104</sup>Arnold Haskell, 'The Bolshoi Stuff is so Old-Fashioned,' *Daily Mail*, 10 October 1956.

<sup>105</sup>Cyril Beaumont, 'A Nun-like Juliet,' *The Sunday Times*, 7 October 1956.

<sup>106</sup>Noël Goodwin, 'And, on Stage, a Mammoth Murder,' *Daily Express*, 4 October 1956.

<sup>107</sup>Peter Brinson, 'The Bolshoi Ballet Backstage,' *The Observer*, 28 October 1956.

<sup>108</sup>'Arise Sir Webster!' *Daily Mirror*, 5 October 1956.

<sup>109</sup>Interview with John Tooley, Cambridge (2009).

<sup>110</sup>Note by Owain-Jones, Controller Arts & Science to Kenneth Loch, 31 October 1, 956, S2, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>111</sup>Special Meeting, 6 November 1956, BW2/540, TNA.

they have been led to believe that they have a monopoly of talent, which is not the case.<sup>112</sup> Cancelling the tour to Russia was thus a symbolic and political failure. Although the politicians actually had the final say, it was Webster who announced the news to the Bolshoi's Director; he stressed that the British Government and British Council were in agreement, and that this was not his own unilateral decision: crisis calls for unity. All exchanges with the USSR were momentarily frozen, owing to a wave of 'anti-Soviet' feeling in the wake of the Hungarian events, as British diplomacy explained.

The cancellation led to an array of legal, logistical, and political problems. From a legal standpoint, this was breach of contract by Covent Garden, with the attendant financial consequences. Both Covent Garden and the Bolshoi Ballet needed the income from ticket sales in Moscow. There were direct losses for the sets and costumes that had already been packed off to the USSR, with the Foreign Office and British Embassy as frontline negotiators for their return. This was eventually solved by correspondence, via arrangements rather simpler than the diplomats had initially foreseen. Politically however, the cancellation had a great symbolic impact. In a telegram to Webster, Chulaki expressed doubts as to the real reason behind the cancellation since from his standpoint, the tour, 'that contributed to the spirit of friendship and mutual understanding', had been a diplomatic success. For several weeks, the ballet had been kept well away from Cold War politics:

We understand that the reason for your refusal to come to the Soviet Union is not the events in Hungary ... but the just policy of the Soviet Government which has the unanimous support of the whole of our people, in regard to the aggression committed by Britain, France and Israel against the freedom and independence of the Egyptian people. As regards the events in Hungary, we refer you in this question to the published documents of the Hungarian Revolutionary Workers' and Peasants' Government and also to the material on the atrocities of the White Terror in Hungary published in other newspapers (including the American press).<sup>113</sup> A counterrevolutionary protest movement in 1919–1921 that had numerous Jewish, Freemason, Social-Democratic, and Communist victims.

Here it is a textbook study of the Cold War gate-crashing the two Ballet Directors' exchanges. Chulaki reflects the USSR's official standpoint – Britain is accused of exploiting the Hungarian crisis to mask its imperialist and neo-colonial policies in the Middle East. Britain blames the USSR for invading Hungary, without, however, caring to refer to the Suez Crisis. In London though, Webster and the Royal Opera House Board received dozens of letters of support. A special benefit performance for Hungarians was held, with dancers from Sadler's Wells, London Festival Ballet, and the Ballet Rambert.<sup>114</sup> Cold War fever hit other troupes as well; American Ballet Theatre for example, then touring Europe, cancelled its trip to Cairo and danced in Athens instead.<sup>115</sup>

Four months later, in February 1957, the Foreign Office announced its intention to renew cultural exchanges with the USSR, though on a smaller scale and 'in coordination with the French and American allies'.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless the idea of sending a British troupe to the USSR was not altogether dropped, and dates were regularly suggested from 1958 on. One British dancer was sent to Moscow, at the Bolshoi's invitation in 1957; Covent Garden's Beryl

<sup>112</sup>Letter by Kenneth Loch to Christopher Mayhew, 12 October 1956, BW64/30, TNA.

<sup>113</sup>Telegram by Chulaki to Webster, 21 November 1956, BW64/30, TNA [translation by British Council].

<sup>114</sup>Board Minutes, 11th meeting, 20 November 1956, ROHC.

<sup>115</sup>American Ballet Theatre records, 32/3064, European tour, 5 November 1956, 2, NYPL-JRDD.

<sup>116</sup>Note from Foreign Office, 21 February 1957, BW2/540, TNA.

Grey has recounted her adventures in a memoir.<sup>117</sup> Only in June–July 1961 did the Sadler’s Wells Ballet embark upon the tour. Despite Nina Ponomareva and the Hungarian crisis, the Bolshoi tour, announced in the press as ‘one of the most historical cultural exchanges that has ever occurred’, has never faded from the memory of London’s balletomanes and dancers.<sup>118</sup> On occasion, the Iron Curtain could prove to be a ‘nylon curtain.’<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup>Beryl Grey, *Red Curtain Up* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958).

<sup>118</sup>‘London Acclaims Bolshoi’s “Romeo,”’ *New York Times* (3 October 1956), 29.

<sup>119</sup>Péteri, ‘Nylon Curtain’, 113–23.