The Spartacus story as balletic propaganda in the Soviet Union

This essay deals with the reception of the Spartacus War in Soviet Russia, particularly Moscow, in the 1950s and 60s. I will be using the ballet *Spartacus* as my main source. The score was written by Aram Khachaturian in 1954, and it was choreographed by Yuri Grigorovich in 1968. Though Leonid Yakobson and Igor Moiseyev also choreographed ballets about the Spartacus War for the Bolshoi Ballet (Moscow's ballet company) in years previous to this, Moiseyev in 1958, and Yakobson in 1962[1], I will be focusing on Grigorovich's choreography, as it was the most successful of the three and is still being performed in Russia and worldwide today. The main focus of this essay will be on examining the role which gender plays in the portrayals of Spartacus and Crassus, and their respective love interests: Phrygia and Aegina. The gender constructs of three different cultures contribute to the portrayals of these characters. The first is the male-dominated culture of the Roman Empire and the Spartacus Revolt, where both the slaves and those whom they were rebelling against were mostly male. The second is that of Communist Russia, which proclaimed itself as a more egalitarian culture than the Capitalist Western world, as it allowed and encouraged women to work. The third is the culture of ballet, which is dominated by women, yet its authority figures, the directors and choreographers, are predominantly male.

I will also address the use of *Spartacus* as a propaganda piece, and analyse the ways in which it was used to identify the countries and ideologies which the Soviet Union considered its enemies, and in what capacity they were considered enemies. The ballet's plot differs considerably from Plutarch's account of events, not only because new events and characters were added, but also because the ballet primarily focuses on Spartacus as its main character, whereas Plutarch's account, as part of his *Life of Crassus*, naturally has Crassus as its protagonist, though he respects Spartacus, calling him "more Hellenic than Thracian".[2] This was the formulaic comment to make about a rebel whom the Romans nevertheless respected, and shows that Plutarch considered Spartacus a worthy opponent for Crassus.

The plot of *Spartacus* is as follows: Crassus and his army have just won a victory over the Thracians, capturing many slaves. In the original account by Plutarch, it is not mentioned how Spartacus came to be a slave, yet it makes dramatic sense to establish Crassus as a character early on and to ensure that Crassus's and Spartacus's aims are antagonistic from the outset of the plot. Among the slaves are Spartacus and his wife Phrygia. The Romans come and separate the male and female slaves, taking Phrygia to join Crassus's harem. Plutarch's account mentions Spartacus's wife (unnamed) as a prophetess, though she is never portrayed as such in the ballet, and describes her as living with him and sharing his escape. He never mentions Spartacus and Phrygia being separated, though historians have remarked on how unlikely it was for a slave to be sold together with their wife, given that slaves could not legally marry at all[3]. Spartacus is forced to become a gladiator. Phrygia is alone until the lights reveal Crassus and his mistress Aegina, having an orgy with some very American-cabaret-style entertainers, whom Phrygia is forced to join. Spartacus enters as an andabata and fights for the entertainment of Crassus, killing one of his fellow slaves. This duel has no basis in Plutarch's account, who merely states that they were kept in "close confinement", "through no misconduct of their own", though he states that they were used for gladiatorial combat. Horrified at what he has done,

[1] Searcy, A., 2016. The Recomposition of Aram Khachaturian's Spartacus at the Bolshoi Theater, 1958–1968. *The Journal of Musicology*, *33*(3), pp.362-400.
[2] Plutarch, *Life of Crassus,* http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Crassus*.html pp. 337 (Accessed 26/07/2022)
[3] Croix, (1981) as cited in Paul, (2010)

Spartacus returns to his fellow slaves and incites them to escape. They swear loyalty to each other and the act ends with Spartacus surrounded by his followers, triumphant.

Act 2 begins with a scene of agricultural tranquillity, with shepherds and shepherdesses dancing until Spartacus and his men enter. (This scene is choreographically the most boring in the entire ballet, and though Plutarch records the slaves being joined by "many of the herdsmen and shepherds of the region", I suspect that it was included less out of a desire to remain true to the historical record than from a propagandistic desire to remind the citizens of Moscow of their dependence upon the common welfare of the country as a whole, as represented by the agricultural peasants.) The shepherds join the ranks of Spartacus's army and they all swear loyalty to each other again. The Romans prepare to go out to fight Spartacus, led by Crassus. The Roman wives dance to bid them farewell, at the bidding of Aegina, who has a solo of sensuality and power. Aegina is not mentioned anywhere by Plutarch in connection with the Spartacus War, and it seems that Grigorovich simply made her up. Despite Plutarch's description of Crassus as "temperate and moderate in his manner of life"[4], Grigorovich portrays Crassus throughout the ballet as decadent and sexually gluttonous, and the addition of Aegina's role contributes greatly to this. Into their midst burst Spartacus and his army, come to rescue their fellow slaves, including Phrygia. Spartacus and Crassus fight; Spartacus wins but lets Crassus go. Crassus and Spartacus are never recorded as having fought face-to-face, but it is true that there were several battles between Crassus's and Spartacus's forces before the final battle in which Spartacus was defeated. The act ends with Spartacus surrounded by his followers, once again triumphant.

Act 3 begins with Crassus furious and horrified at his defeat by Spartacus. Aegina tries to comfort him and questions him, though he repels her, and she reminds him of his duty to the Roman Empire. He recalls his army, and they exit, goose-stepping. Aegina has a solo, in which she finds Spartacus's camps and observes its doings. Different factions within Spartacus's camp are at loggerheads, with Spartacus trying to keep the peace between them. This was in Plutarch's account, as he mentions that "many of the gladiator's men had seceded after a quarrel with him." Aegina witnesses all of this and tells Crassus. Crassus and his men prepare for war and have a final confrontation with the slaves, who are defeated. Spartacus continues fighting alone, and is finally killed by many spears. Plutarch, too, records that he continued fighting after the main body of his army was defeated until he was killed. Neither in the ballet nor in Plutarch's account did Crassus strike the killing blow himself, though in the ballet he is onstage when Spartacus is killed and exits immediately after. It is clear that in the ballet's plot, Crassus only exists to be an antagonist to Spartacus, whereas in Plutarch's account, he goes on to explain how his victory was received in Rome. Phrygia and the other slaves mourn Spartacus and their loss of freedom and retrieve his body. Plutarch does not record what was done to the body of Spartacus, though it is doubtful that any of the slaves who managed to escape would have been able to retrieve his body from the battlefield without being seen and caught. The act ends with Spartacus's body being lifted, surrounded by his followers.

The first and most obvious instance of the extraordinary role which gender plays in the portrayals of the characters in *Spartacus* is the fact that it had a large male corps de ballet. A corps de ballet is the chorus of the ballet, who have no individual characters and must dance in perfect unison. The corps de ballet is sometimes referred to as "the backbone of the ballet" in acknowledgement of the fact that while the principal dancers may have more time in the spotlight and more virtuosic choreography , the true technical prowess of a company and success of a production depend upon

[4] Plutarch, *Life of Crassus,* http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Crassus*.html pp. 315 (Accessed 26/07/2022)

its corps de ballet. Several ballets are famous for their dances for the corps de ballet. For example, the Entrance of the Shades in *La Bayadère* or the Wilis dancing Hilarion and Albrecht to death in *Giselle* are both iconic parts of a classical ballet company's repertoire. However, both of these dances, and many more besides, are performed by an all-female corps. The fact that Grigorovich used a male corps de ballet for his main group dances, such as the revolt of the slaves, or the preparation of the Romans for battle, is a reflection of the fact that the world in which the story of *Spartacus* takes place is so male-dominated, it would be impossible to tell the story without a background of male dancers.

However, there is another interpretation of the usage of a male corps de ballet, particularly the slave corps de ballet. The very fact of having to be a part of such a traditionally female group could be seen to signal the emasculation of the male slaves that resulted from their lack of freedom[5]. In the introduction to *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,* Sarah Ashwin writes that "masculinity became socialised and embodied in the Soviet state, the masculinity of individual men being officially defined by their position in the service of that state.[6]" While Grigorovich may not have been consciously drawing parallels between the Soviet system and the Roman one, it is clear that to his mind, and to the mind of his audience, how masculine you were was dependent on your position in society. The choreography reflects this belief, as when the male slaves first come onstage, they are performing the exact same choreography as the female slaves, and it is not until they revolt that they start to do more traditionally "masculine" steps, such as a pas de chat en tournant.

Both Plutarch's original account of the Spartacus Revolt and the ballet's plot have characters that seemingly fall into typical archetypes of their gender: Spartacus is the strong male hero, Phrygia the damsel in distress, Crassus a debauched, powerful leader, and Aegina a cunning seductress. However, the choreography, the vehicle through which the story of any ballet is told, creates a much more nuanced perspective of the ways in which gender shapes the characters. The characters frequently perform steps which are, in traditional ballet, only given to the other gender, and this would have caused an audience used to the classical repertoire to recognise these characters as more complex than the traditional archetypes that are frequently used in classical ballet.

An example of this is Spartacus's entrance in Act 2, when he attacks the Roman army. In addition to many jumps which are in the traditional male ballet dancer's repertoire, and would be expected to be used in a fight scene, Spartacus performs several fouettés. This is a very famous step that is a traditional part of a female dancer's repertoire, used to display a ballerina's virtuosity. While male ballet dancers do sometimes perform fouettés, they are normally performed in second position, rather than with the leg moving to a different position during the turn in the iconic 'whipping' movement that characterises all 'female' fouettés. The usage of such a 'feminine' step in a pivotal dramatic moment in fact heightens the tension and exaggerates the danger that Spartacus is facing at this moment. 'Male' fouettés, done in second, with both the arms and legs in a position that is very confident and open to the audience, are a vulnerable, dangerous step to be doing in the middle of a battle. The use of 'female' fouettés in this instance is an excellent choreographic choice, as by giving Spartacus a more feminine step, Grigorovich is making his character, and the setting, more believable.

[5] I owe this insight to my sister, Louisa Hadari

[6] [6] Ashwin, S. ed., 2000. *Gender, state, and society in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia* (p. 90). London: Routledge. pp.1

Another character whose choreography and plot lines demonstrate ambivalent feelings regarding gender is Aegina. She is blatantly debauched, but also active in her political role, encouraging Crassus to re-engage in battle with Spartacus (also doing a fair amount of saluting and goose-stepping), and spies out the slaves' camp for Crassus. As a character, she is much more active, and much more 'empowered' (I am here using this term to indicate a strong involvement in, and impact upon, the events unfolding around her), than the supposed heroine of the ballet, Phrygia, who has a basis in the historical record and who has received attention in several novels of the Spartacus Revolt[7]. Inventing Aegina as a character was an unusual move, as it meant that the ballet was built around two main couples, rather than one main couple and a villain who is a relatively minor role, as in ballets such as *Swan Lake* or *Giselle*. She does, however, fit into one of the female character archetypes of classical ballet: the seductress, similar to the role of Odile in *Swan Lake.* What is interesting about Grigorovich's portrayal of the female characters in *Spartacus* is the agency which he gives to the villainess, and the lack of it that is apparent in the heroine.

In his article *Gender and Utopia in three Spartacus novels*, Ronald Paul discusses the fact that the differing amounts of agency given to the woman who is Spartacus's wife/mistress is "in direct proportion to the utopian dimensions of the narrative"[8]. I argue that the amount of agency given to Crassus' mistress is indicative of the highly ambivalent view that the Soviet Union had of women, and of the role that women should have in a Communist society. Ashwin writes that the role of women was "to work, to produce future generations of workers, as well as to oversee the running of the household.[9]" Though they received "'protection' from the state in their capacity as mothers, as well as independence through their access to paid work"[10], I argue that the role of producing future generations of workers meant that the Soviet Union were less inclined to trust women and mothers, as they not only needed to be loyal to the state themselves, they needed to raise children who would be equally loyal, or even more so.

With this in mind, it seems as though Grigorovich is portraying Aegina's loyalty and practical commitment to her state and her lover as a good thing – but she is loyal to the wrong side. A total commitment to the wrong cause was precisely what the Soviet Union did not want to encourage, which makes this attribute that would have been positive in Phrygia negative in Aegina. Conversely, Phrygia is seemingly a very passive character. Grigorovich's pas de deux choreography has been remarked upon many times for the inventiveness and pathos of many of his lifts[11]. Yet the very fact that there are so many lifts merely demonstrates the extent of Phrygia's passivity; she spends the entire ballet being literally carried around by Spartacus. However, there is one moment where she displays agency. In the very final scene of the ballet, she and several other slaves, who have managed to escape being crucified on the Appian Way, retrieve Spartacus's body and give him what

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[7] Paul, R., 2010. "Spartacus's wife, a woman who came from the same tribe as Spartacus, was a prophetess": Gender and Utopia in Three Spartacus Novels. *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate*, *14*(2).

[8] Paul, R., 2010. "Spartacus's wife, a woman who came from the same tribe as Spartacus, was a prophetess": Gender and Utopia in Three Spartacus Novels. *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate*, *14*(2).

[9] Ashwin, S. ed., 2000. *Gender, state, and society in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia* (p. 90). London: Routledge. pp.1

[10] Ashwin, S. ed., 2000. *Gender, state, and society in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia* (p. 90). London: Routledge. pp.1

[11] https://danceartjournal.com/2019/08/01/from-tiring-to-triumphant-bolshois-spartacus-at-roh-review/ (Accessed 29/07/2022)

amounts to a funeral, raising him high above the stage. Phrygia places his shield upon his chest and raises her arms to the heavens in appeal to the gods.

This action places her in a tradition of insisting on the burial rights of fallen soldiers, one which has been important to women in drama since Antigone. This also reflects the fact that despite the atheism of the Communist Party and Soviet regime as a whole, they did find it important to ensure that the graves of war heroes were decorated and recognised in some way. An anonymous female writer, in her diary recording the events unfolding around her as Berlin was invaded by the Russian army in the spring of 1945 noted that, "They [the Russians], too, practice their own cult of graves, their own hero-veneration, though officially their ideology rejects any resurrection of the flesh … They envelop their dead soldiers in an aura of red, and sacrifice both work and good wood to provide them with an aureole."[12]

While it is unlikely that in the original historical event it would have been possible to remove and bury Spartacus's body without being caught, I argue that the final scene of the ballet was Spartacus's burial and memorial, not only so that the ballet could have an uplifting ending, but so that Phrygia, who up until that point had not done anything to help herself, her fellow slaves or Spartacus, could demonstrate to the women in the Moscow audience the role that women could play in honouring the dead who had died for the common good.

However, the very fact that Grigorovich was able to give his ballet such an unrealistic ending clearly demonstrates that the Soviet Union were not interested in creating a ballet that was an accurate historical retelling of events (though very few ballets, of course, ever adhere to the original plot of the historical events, or story that it is based on), rather, in using the legend of Spartacus's Revolt as the plot of a ballet, they wished to make an allegory of it, in which the Romans were the enemies of the USSR, and the rebellious slaves the uprising proletariat of the Russian Revolution. The reason why the Soviet regime popularised ballet in the first place was "to use it as a propaganda tool through the creation of new ballets on contemporary Soviet topics"[13]. Though the Bolshoi and Kirov (the two major Russian ballet companies) were rarely able to achieve this, as they often preferred to stage more traditional productions such as *Swan Lake* (Khrushchev even complained that he dreamed of white tutus at night from taking visiting dignitaries to see it[14]), there was considerable government pressure on companies and choreographers to produce material that was relevant to the new Soviet regime, to the extent that a government decree was passed in 1957 calling for a creative competition of new ballets[15]. It is clear that *Spartacus* was intended to be a propaganda piece, and that it was considered effective, because of three different ballets of *Spartacus* produced by the Bolshoi between 1958 and 1968, each choreographed to the same music with a different choreographer[16], Grigorovich's choreography was the most successful, and is still performed outside of the former Soviet Union[17].

One of the major features of the ballet which demonstrates the use of the ballet as propaganda is the ways in which the Romans are presented and choreographed. In the very opening scene, the

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[12] Anonymous, 2011. *A Woman in Berlin.* 5th edn. London: Virago Press. pp.169

[13] Ezrahi, C., 2012. *Swans of the Kremlin: ballet and power in Soviet Russia*. University of Pittsburgh Pre. pp.69
[14] Ezrahi, C., 2012. *Swans of the Kremlin: ballet and power in Soviet Russia*. University of Pittsburgh Pre. pp.68
[15] Ezrahi, C., 2012. *Swans of the Kremlin: ballet and power in Soviet Russia*. University of Pittsburgh Pre. pp.71
[16] Searcy, A., 2016. The Recomposition of Aram Khachaturian's Spartacus at the Bolshoi Theater, 1958–1968. *The Journal of Musicology*, *33*(3), pp.362-400.

[17] https://www.ilona-landgraf.com/2016/12/munichs-heroes/ (Accessed 25/07/2022)

Romans are shown goose-stepping and giving the Nazi salute. This is a motif that reprises throughout the ballet, whenever the Romans are preparing for battle. While it is true that the Nazi salute was derived from the original Roman salute, the usage of this salute in combination with the goose-stepping (which is differentiated from ordinary straight-legged marching by the fact that the legs are lifted higher – which makes it excellently suited to be adapted into ballet choreography) clearly shows that it was intended to be interpreted as a Nazi salute.

The portrayal of the Romans as Nazis shows that the Soviet Union still wished to regard Nazi Germany as its main military enemy, despite the fact that it had already defeated Nazi Germany, over twenty years previously. The determination to portray the Romans as Nazis, and thus to allegorically insist that the Nazis had been the only military threat to the Soviet Union worth mentioning, meant that the Soviet Union was determined to ignore any possibility of America or anywhere else developing into a military threat to them, or at least to act as though this was not a possibility. At the same time, they were trying to bolster the morale and confidence of the Russian people, by implying that the only military threat to the Soviet Union had already been defeated.

At the same time, Grigorovich seems to have had no qualms about openly acknowledging that America was the Soviet Union's cultural enemy, as the Roman culture is portrayed as immensely decadent and immoral, in a very capitalistic American style. The very first scene in which the Romans are shown outside of a context of war involves a chorus line of girls performing a dance reminiscent of American musical theatre choreography, and the music at this point is also almost parodying American jazz music at the time. Moreover, in one of the solos given to Aegina, the character who is most used to exemplify the decadent nature of Roman culture, a recurring step is a position known as a bevil. This is a step that is frequently used in most musical theatre choreography, and was at the time being used increasingly in America by choreographers such as Bob Fosse. The bevil is not a ballet position, in fact as it is characterised by its 'turned-in' position, rather than the 'turn-out' that is the defining feature of classical ballet, it could almost be said to be the antithesis of classical ballet. While Grigorovich's choreography was neoclassical, which is a style which uses some turned-in positions, the emphatic use of a position that belonged to such a different dance style meant that Grigorovich was making a clear stylistic reference to American choreographers.

In conclusion, the choreography and characterisation of both the male and the female characters in *Spartacus*, used to display the different gender roles within the ballet, were also used to display the gender roles expected of men and women in Soviet Russia and the Ancient Roman Empire. The powerful female character was villainised, using her sexuality to assist Crassus in his fight against Spartacus, and the passive female character is redeemed, in a sense, from her passivity, in ensuring the honourable burial of her lover. In the final scene of *Spartacus*, while both male and female slaves are onstage to mourn Spartacus, it is the women who are downstage, in the spotlight and eventually crowding so thickly around Spartacus that the audience can barely see him. It is Phrygia who holds the audience's attention as the ballet ends, and perhaps the point that Grigorovich ended up making, albeit unintentionally, was that though the world in which the Spartacus Revolt took place, and the world in which it was being retold, were both dominated by men, it was the women who ensured that Spartacus was buried with honour, and a female-led art form which was adapted in order to tell his story.

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