

To what extent did international ballet tours between the USSR and US function as tools for projecting superpower supremacy during the Cold War (1958–1962)?

On the 24th of October 1962, as the US armed forces reached DEFCON 2, the second highest state of military alert, the New York City Ballet performers stood in the wings of the Kremlin theatre fearing what was to come.¹ They listened to Soviet tanks rumbling through the streets of Moscow, whilst trying to prepare themselves to perform in front of a Soviet audience of 6000.² Despite being informed that the US could not help them if missiles were fired, the dancers performed their spectacular evening show on the stage of a country with whom they were on the brink of nuclear war, and received thunderous applause.³ This moment highlights the central issue this essay will address: the conflict between the political intentions behind the ballet tour exchanges during the Cold War and the reality of how these exchanges were experienced. Both the United States and the Soviet Union intended to use international ballet tours to project superpower supremacy: the idea that their ideology and political system was superior to the other. This essay argues that while ballet tours were deliberately designed to project this, their ability to do so was ultimately limited. Although governments attempted to connect their ballet dancers' artistic excellence with the achievement of their own political system, audiences tended to value the dancers' performances separately from this, appreciating the art instead of a political message. This essay will examine state intentions through the organisation of such ballet tours, for example the Lacy-Zarubin agreement and choreography choices, and the reality of these tours through the 1959 Bolshoi Ballet and the 1962 New York City Ballet (NYCB) tours, and the significance of how audiences perceived them.

For the Soviet government, international ballet tours functioned as far more than demonstrations of artistic excellence; they were state sanctioned instruments to promote the superiority of Soviet ideals to the West through grand and theatrical choreography. The first exchange occurred after the signing of the Lacy-Zarubin agreement in 1958, where US diplomat William S.B. Lacy and Soviet Ambassador Georgy Zarubin agreed to several cultural exchanges, with an aim of easing tensions, one of these exchanges being the Bolshoi Ballet troupe.⁴ It was agreed the troupe of 110-120 people would tour the US for a month in 1959.⁵ The decision to send the Bolshoi to the US demonstrates how the Soviet Union tried to use ballet as a tool to project their supremacy, as it was a pivotal opportunity to challenge American assumptions of

¹ K.M. Absher, 'DEFCON 2', *Mind-Sets and Missiles: A First-Hand Account of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009), p. 69.

² R. Marcy, 'Dancers and Diplomats: New York City Ballet in Moscow, October 1962', *The Appendix*, Vol.2, No.3, 9 September 2014. <https://theappendix.net/issues/2014/7/dancers-and-diplomats-new-york-city-ballet-in-moscow-october-1962> [accessed 13 July 2026].

³ C. Croft, 'Ballet Nations: The New York City Ballet's 1962 US State Department-Sponsored Tour of the Soviet Union', *Theatre Journal*, Vol.61, No.3, p. 436; A. Searcy, *Soviet and American Cold War Ballet Exchange, 1952-1962*, (Harvard 2016), p. 133.

⁴ *Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical and Educational Fields*, Washington, DC: U.S Government printing office, 1958, p. 18.

⁵ Ibid.

Soviet inferiority, and demonstrate their sophistication and dominance. Even the choice of repertoire had a political agenda behind it, with the well-known musician Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* acting as a strategic instrument, familiar to the American audiences yet also displaying the Soviet trademark 'dramaballet' style.⁶ The reliance on theatrics was deliberately used to highlight the intensity and detail of Soviet ballet training, and to amaze audiences into viewing their culture and art as superior and more emotionally resonant than abstract Western ballet.⁷ These uniquely immersive stories allowed the USSR to claim their socialism had produced a more sophisticated and bonding art form than the West. Zoya Tulubyeva's 1957 Mosfilm of the Bolshoi performing *Swan Lake*, featuring the same choreography and cast used in the 1959 tour, is a useful insight into what the Soviets wished to project with their ballet. In opening the film by focusing on the crowds entering the Bolshoi theatre, rather than the stage or dancers, and showing working-class citizens eager to watch the ballet, the Soviets can be seen as trying to differentiate themselves from the West, displaying ballet as an asset for all people rather than just a luxury for the elite.⁸ Furthermore, the Jester, played by Victor Khomyakov, displays great physicality in his performance; he enters the stage, immediately performing 8 rapid pirouettes, followed by numerous jumps, 8 chaîne turns and 30 more turns. This showcase of stamina was unseen in Western ballet companies, and a way for the Soviets to signal the strength and superiority of their ballet dancers and training. The White Swan, Maya Plisetskaya's performance was a testament to the other defining strength the Soviet dancers had over the West; emotion and psychological depth. Her elegant arm movements, elaborate costume, and intense emotions were intended to contrast Western abstract ballet, which lacked the story, costume, and performance that Soviet ballet did. However, the film's state-commissioned origin must not be dismissed; smart camera cuts mask the exhaustion of the dancers and accentuate their best moments through strategic close-up shots, highlighting how this film would not have been exactly what American audiences would have seen from the Bolshoi on the tour.⁹ The film is valuable for understanding the polished, magnificent image of communist strength that the Soviet state wanted to project to the West. Cadra Peterson McDaniel offers a convincing interpretation of the Bolshoi tours as a form of 'artful warfare'; she argues the Soviet's used the Bolshoi as a form of cultural diplomacy, presenting their own culture and art as superior.¹⁰ This idea that arts and politics cannot be separated is persuasive, as even the decision to send one of their most prestigious ballet companies abroad demonstrates how the Soviet's intended to use ballet as a tool to project its prestige, and ideally its regime's superiority. However, McDaniel's argument becomes weakened when considering the actual impact of the tours, as while the intentions behind the tours had a clear political agenda, their impact depended on foreign audience perceptions, an idea which will be explored later in the essay. Therefore, the Soviet intentions behind international ballet tours, specifically the 1959 tour, demonstrates that ballet tours were intended to function as tools for projecting superpower supremacy to a significant extent. The carefully selected performance repertoire and emphasis on stamina and emotion, things they

⁶ Searcy, *Cold War Ballet Exchange, 1952-1962*, (Harvard 2016), p. 38.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Z. Tulubyeva, *Swan Lake* (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1957, YouTube, uploaded by Yucaipa Studio Archive, 2025) [accessed 7 July 2026]

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ C. P. McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere*, (Lanham, 2015), pp. xxx.

viewed the Western ballet dancers as lacking, allowed the USSR to present artistic success as a result of the communist climate. While the tours represented a deliberate projection of superpower supremacy, the extent to which they functioned as tools projecting this in reality depended on how audiences interpreted this display, and whether they associated Soviet ballet with Soviet ideology.

While Soviet ballet tours were intended to function as tools for projecting superpower supremacy, their reception in America demonstrates that the tours only partially functioned in this way, due to the fact most did not make the link between the admiration they felt for the Bolshoi to an admiration of the communist system. *TIME* described the Bolshoi's opening performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Metropolitan Opera House as 'not a disappointment', even praising Ulanova as a 'true wonder of her time'.¹¹ This review, which would have been widely read by Americans, demonstrates that the Bolshoi may have projected an image of cultural prestige, but not necessarily wider Soviet supremacy. The praise and interest centred around individual dancers and their technique, with criticism limited to the choreography being somewhat dated, displaying how perhaps it was the actual skill of the dancers and choreographers being examined, instead of the Soviet ideology or political system.¹² While the *TIME*'s lively review may not reflect the view of the every day American, it still demonstrates that while the tour allowed the USSR to challenge assumptions about Western artistic superiority, it did not necessarily convince the American public of the superiority of communism. Another example of the undermining of any intended Soviet political agenda is through Plisetskaya herself; she had a history of conflict with the USSR, including the Soviet secret police's execution of her father, yet once she hit the stage her political life was completely overshadowed by praise for her magnificent dancing.¹³ This once again demonstrates how the ballet tours could not function as political tools, when the beauty and artistry of dancers like Plisetskaya was so captivating that politics seemed insignificant. While audiences praised the dancers, with Ulanova reportedly being called back onto stage for seventeen curtain calls on opening night, criticism did sometimes arise surrounding the traditional Soviet choreography and overly grand sets.¹⁴ This potentially reveals that the ballet tours may not have even functioned as tools promoting cultural prestige, let alone superpower supremacy, as the idea of the East being behind the West was still present and unchallenged in some people's minds. A more hostile reception occurred during the Bolshoi's 1962 return tour; while Plisetskaya's praise continued, critics claimed the new production of *Spartacus* lacked taste, was dated and cheap, with crowds reportedly booing the dancers as they performed.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this criticism had little effect on the political tension between the superpowers; John F. Kennedy was still photographed with the Bolshoi dancers during their visit, his first public appearance after the Cuban Missile Crisis, demonstrating that the tour was still a valuable tool for displaying diplomatic relations, but had

¹¹ *TIME*, 'Music: Bolshoi at the Met', 27 April 1959.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Searcy, *Soviet and American Cold War Ballet Exchange*, pp. 72-74.

¹⁴ M. Freudenheim, 'Bolshoi Ballet's U.S. Premiere a Dazzling Smash,' *Chicago Daily News*, April 17, 1959.

¹⁵ W. Sargeant, 'What, No Grapes?', *The New Yorker*, 22 September 1962, pp. 147.

little effect on projecting the supremacy of either power.¹⁶ Therefore, while the tours could enhance or damage Soviet cultural prestige, reactions to works like *Spartacus* indicate that they had a limited capacity to function as tools for projecting political dominance, as they had little influence on perceptions of the superpower's ideologies. As Searcy argues, reactions to the ballet tours did not mean that American audiences accepted or rejected the political messages that were attached to them.¹⁷ She argues that audiences interpreted ballet in their own way, and while the USSR could control the image it presented, it could not control the reactions and conclusions people drew. This interpretation is particularly compelling, as it highlights how, despite the ballets tours being intended to function as tools for projecting supremacy, audiences were more interested in the characters the ballet brought to their attention, and their dances, rather than the ideological superiority they were meant to represent. This is clearly demonstrated by the admiration and fascination generated amongst American audiences for specific dancers rather than with politics or communism. A pivotal moment when audience perception of the ballet tours was altered, affecting their ability to function as tools for projecting superpower supremacy, was with Nureyev's defection in 1961. Just weeks before the Kirov ballet company was meant to begin an international tour, Rudolf Nureyev requested the Paris police for political asylum.¹⁸ Nureyev was the first ballet dancer to defect from the USSR to the West. Even if embracing Western freedom and ideals was not Nureyev's whole intention behind defecting, his defection hugely undermined the image of cultural superiority the ballet tours intended to promote and shattered the prospect of promoting communism as the superior ideology. His defection gave the West evidence of the superiority of capitalism, as one of the Soviet Union's own citizens had abandoned communism and chosen Western democracy, promoting Western supremacy. While the cultural prestige of future tours was not destroyed, this damaged the possibility of the West associating the Soviet's ballet prowess with the superiority of the communist system. If audiences were to interpret the tours through a political lens, which rarely occurred, they may now be viewed as as a testament to the artistic talent that still thrived in the USSR *despite* the repression and dissatisfaction its dancers faced, creating sympathy for, rather than showing supremacy of, the Soviet system. Thus, the reaction to Soviet ballet tours demonstrates that while intended to function as tools projecting superpower supremacy, they largely did not fulfil this, instead perhaps projecting cultural prestige. The Bolshoi gained immense admiration and appreciation amongst the American public; however, this artistic excellence failed to translate into awe of the Soviet state. This idea was only strengthened by defections like Nureyev's, which gave a new meaning to the tours' cultural prestige, making the task of projecting superpower supremacy more complex.

Like the USSR, the US also recognised the benefit of using international ballet tours as a tool to demonstrate superiority; however, unlike the Soviet Union's attempt to display the excellence of communism through powerful and precise ballet, the US used ballet to project the superiority of democracy, marking individual expression and creativity as defining qualities of capitalism. By

¹⁶ M. Hunter, 'President Cheers the Bolshoi Ballet', *New York Times*, 14 November 1962, p. 1.

¹⁷ Searcy, *Cold War Ballet Exchange*, pp. 75

¹⁸ K. Montana, 'The Case Against Rudolf Nureyev: A Legal Case Study of the KGB's Pursuits against Defectors', *St Andrews Law Journal*, (November 2020), p. 57.

1962, exchanges of ballet companies had become an established element of cultural diplomacy, therefore the US and USSR sent parallel ballet companies to tour each other's countries during this year, with the US sending the NYCB.¹⁹ However, despite the liberal values of the US and their attempt to showcase these, this exchange was still taken seriously as regardless of not having the same Imperial roots in ballet as Russia, it was still essential for America to demonstrate that it had *superior* ballet.²⁰ Although the Soviets had largely moved away from the 'dramaballet' style to the less theatrical choreographic symphonism style, George Balanchine, Soviet émigré turned US choreographer, was still reluctant to allow the NYCB to tour. This was perhaps due to fear of criticism for his abstract choreography, but also his own anti-Russian sentiment.²¹ Nevertheless, the NYCB did tour the USSR, and like the Soviets, the US's choice of repertoire projected a carefully constructed image which they wanted to present to foreign audiences. Therefore, their tour program included: *Serenade*, *Agon*, *Western Symphony* and *Interplay*.²² The choreography was intended to completely contrast what they perceived Soviet ballet to be, presenting American ballet as modern and superior. Due to this, abstract ballets were chosen; these ballets lacked a storyline, were performed with minimal staging and costume, and placed full emphasis on the dancers' movement, as opposed to a storyline which the Soviets preferred.²³ The American government intended to use these abstract ballets to represent innovation and modernity, highlighting the Soviet's perceived lack of this, and tried to connect this creative, unrestrained ballet style with the capitalist state, which gave artists creative agency through its democratic values, thus demonstrating their superiority. In a filmed performance of the *Agon Pas de Deux* de from 1973, featuring the same dancers who performed it on the 1962 tour, the difference between the two countries' idea of supreme ballet is clearly shown. In the *pas de deux*, performed by Allegra Kent and Arthur Mitchell, there is no elaborate staging or storyline, and the costumes are simple.²⁴ This is a huge contrast to the Bolshoi's *Swan Lake* performance. By stripping away the theatrical element, the US projected a message that American ballet dancers had true, raw talent which did not need to be disguised by staging and costumes, implying American ballet was progressive and valued innovation over tradition. Whereas *Swan Lake* relies on graceful symmetry, Balanchine's abstract choreography contrasts this; both dancers deliberately use sharp, angular, movements and contorted positions, challenging Imperial ballet stereotypes.²⁵ Specifically, Kent's use of *épaulement* further demonstrates this; her head unusually acts as a sharp contrast to her body, creating tension. Balanchine's modernist approach was complex and new to Soviet audiences, and the US perhaps tried to connect democracy to this modernity. Furthermore, Mitchell did not simply support his ballerina, like in a traditional Soviet *pas de deux*, but had his own unique and equal role. Furthermore, Mitchell being an African-American principal dancer may also have been intended to demonstrate to Soviet audiences the inclusion and acceptance that America embraced, regardless of the reality, attempting to display their supremacy. This video is a valuable insight into the qualities that

¹⁹ Croft, 'Ballet Nations', p. 426.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Searcy, *Cold War Ballet Exchange*, pp. 182-187.

²² Ibid p. 195.

²³ Croft, 'Ballet Nations', p. 428.

²⁴ G. Balanchine, *Agon: Pas de Deux*, (Berlin: RM production, 1973, YouTube, uploaded by John Clifford, 2025) [accessed 11 July 2026].

²⁵ Ibid.

America sought to promote; however, once again the camera guides the viewer's perspective with close-up shots, highlighting the detailed coordination and pointe work in the dance, meaning that this would not have been the same view of Balanchine's choreography audiences received during the 1962 tour.²⁶ Revisionists like Clare Croft have argued that arts programmes like the NYCB tour, even ones sponsored by the government, did not project a clear and understandable representation of American identity.²⁷ While this is more convincing when studying the reality of such ballet tours, it may understate the rigid political image the US government set to project. The US government did explicitly intend for the tours to be a clear presentation of superpower supremacy, with the ballet dancers being their ideological vehicles, and this was demonstrated through employing Balanchine's modern, neoclassical choreography. From the view of the tour's orchestrators, the NYCB dancers and their performances may have presented a clear and coherent image of what they felt American identity was. Ultimately, the US international ballet tours were intended to function as tools for projecting superpower supremacy to a great extent, much like the Soviet's tours. By selecting abstract, revolutionary choreography like the work of Balanchine, the government tried to deliberately use American art as a demonstration of the innovation and creative freedom which thrived in the US capitalist environment. Once again, the extent to which the tours actually functioned as tools for projecting supremacy was altered by audience reactions to the NYCB, and even the own NYCB dancers' view of the Soviet Union.

Despite being intended to function as tools for projecting superpower supremacy, the Soviet audiences' interpretations of the tour reveal that they only fulfilled this function to a limited extent, perhaps a more limited extent than the Soviet tours. While the image of American ballet being unrefined was seemingly shattered, this did not necessarily translate into an appreciation of capitalism or was even hailed as a result of Americans themselves. A *New York Times* review of the NYCB tour states that audiences were 'cordial' during the opening of the tour; this is likely due to the unfamiliar nature of neoclassical ballet and its lack of storyline.²⁸ This is a clear contrast from the Bolshoi's reception in the US on their opening night of the 1959 tour, who were immediately appreciated, perhaps revealing how Soviet cultural prestige was projected more effectively than American, but still not political supremacy. However, the review says the audience reception became less hostile as the NYCB earned respect, with one dancer even repeating a variation, despite this being contrary to company policy, due to enthusiastic applause.²⁹ However, a clear limitation to this source is the fact that it is a Western interpretation of Soviet perception of the NYCB, not a direct Soviet account. Martin may have had an incentive to glorify and overstate the NYCB's success in the USSR, or prove that American's were accepted by the Soviets, particularly due to the recent Cuban Missile Crisis. Furthermore, Martin was known for his preference of modern ballet, potentially exposing the review to this

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Croft, 'Ballet Nations', p. 421.

²⁸ J. Martin, 'New York City Ballet is a Success in Soviet Union; Unit Wins Respect in Moscow Despite Slow Beginning', *New York Times*, October 22 1962, p. 34.

²⁹ Ibid.

bias, causing over appreciation of the NYCB.³⁰ Despite the source's validity being reduced due to this, it still does not portray acceptance of American ballet as acceptance of American ideology from Soviet audiences, focusing on the dancing itself and Balanchine rather than the wider political struggle, exhibiting how much like American audiences, perhaps Soviet audiences did not connect their appreciation of American ballet to politics. This demonstrates that the tour was not functioning as a tool for projecting political superiority, but rather artistic prestige, if anything. Furthermore, many Soviet audiences drew their own conclusions as to which superpower the NYCB's ballet prowess should be connected to. Balanchine, the NYCB's principal choreographer, was famously trained as a dancer in St. Petersburg at the Imperial Theatre School and danced with the Mariinsky ballet company.³¹ While NYCB dancers felt a connection to Russia, when noticing how similar their American ballet foundation was to Russia's, audiences simultaneously acknowledged this, less so from the choreography and more from Balanchine's origins, meaning many viewed the NYCB's success as a Russian success.³² This undermined the ballet tour's ability to function as a tool promoting cultural prestige, let alone superpower supremacy, due to the fact any complement the NYCB received could be interpreted as a Soviet success. Johnston reassesses the Cultural Cold War, arguing that aesthetics and politics had no precise alignment during it, challenging the view that the tours did function as tools projecting supremacy.³³ While Johnston was not specifically referring to ballet exchanges, his broader idea is compelling when considering the US ballet tours of the USSR. While the tours did attempt to use American ballet as evidence of superior political and social advancement, this complex relationship that Johnston describes emphasised how the extent to which these tours did function as tools cannot be measured solely by what they intended to project. When the NYCB performed in the Soviet Union, audiences and critics experienced the ballet in an individual way, not as a simple demonstration of the advanced nature of America. Ultimately, the extent to which American ballet tours functioned as tools for projecting superpower supremacy in practice was limited, perhaps even more so than the extent of the Soviet tours. Due to the similar tendency for Soviet audiences to separate dance from politics, not connecting the NYCB's routines with the political message of capitalist superiority, as well as Balanchine's Russian rooted choreography undermining American success during the 1962 tour, the intentions the US government had with the tour and what it should project were not fulfilled.

In conclusion, international ballet tours during this period of the Cold War functioned as tools for projecting superpower supremacy to a limited extent. While both countries did intend for the tours to project superiority, as shown through the Soviet's choice to use emotion and grandeur in an attempt to connect communism with wonder and humanity, and the USA's contrasting choice to use abstract, plotless ballet to connect capitalist democracy with innovation and modernity, neither government was able to ensure that this message was carried out. Audiences,

³⁰ C. Hardy, 'Dance Criticism', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 July 2025 <https://www.britannica.com/art/dance-criticism/The-development-of-American-criticism#ref1041832> [accessed 12 July 2026].

³¹ C. Hardy, 'Bringing Bourrées to Broadway: George Balanchine's Career in the Commercial Theatre', *World Literature Today*, Vol. 80, No.2 (2006), p. 16.

³² Croft, 'Ballet Nations', pp. 431-432.

³³ G. Johnston, 'Revisiting the Cultural Cold War', *Social History*, Vol.35, No.3 (2010), p. 291.

critics, and even the performers themselves created their own personal connections to the tours, feeling fascination and admiration for individual dancers and their talent, failing to link this admiration to an admiration of a certain ideology. Therefore, while the tours may have effectively projected cultural prestige, superpower supremacy was projected to a minimal extent.

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