BALLROOM DANCE – THE SPECTRE OF BOURGEOIS IN COMMUNIST SOCIETY

Key words: bourgeois, modern ballroom dance, history of the Soviet Union, history of modern ballroom dance in the Soviet Union, Vincas Mintaučkis.

“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies...”¹

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

“In no other place, however, the new post-war bourgeois world discloses itself so clearly as in contemporary dancing rooms”²

Anatoly Lunacharsky

INTRODUCTION

During the years of the Iron Curtain separating Europe, the authorities in communist countries exercised ideological and practical support for representations of staged folk dance.³ In contrast, modern theatrical dance, which is strongly based on free individual expression, was not favoured by communist regimes.⁴ Very few modern dance studios were able to survive under the hard hand of the regime.⁵ It is quite obvious that some dance genres fitted into the ideological perspective of socialism, while others did not. These value settings in communist countries, as briefly described above, are systematically predictable. What seems less predictable is the fact that development of modern ballroom dance (DanceSport) was tolerated and to some extent even supported by the communist authorities. How is it possible to explain this fact, if we accept the claim that the dance genre is “rooted as it appears to be in class divisions and in the promotion of bourgeois conventionalities”?⁶ The communist ideology was clearly opposed to any bourgeois imagologies, but it embraced the style of dance, which was obvious “promotion of bourgeois” imagery and philosophy. Eventually, this ambiguity in the Soviet regime enabled the later boom of ballroom dance in (post)Soviet bloc countries and the current domination of the arena of DanceSport by Eastern European dancers. This domination was recently deplored by American scholars.⁷

My question is: how is it possible to explain such counter-intuitive and ambiguous historical development? In order to answer this question, I will look into the history of ballroom dance in Lithuania (and to some extent in the Soviet Union). My hypothesis in this article is that the rise of a considerable amount of new urban middle-class people with technical professions and unable to identify with folk dance from peasant culture or with theatrical dance from aristocratic (elite) culture, strongly influenced the boom of modern ballroom dance in the Soviet Union.

To summarize, history turned the other way around. There was a time in the mid-nineteenth century when Marx and Engels invoked the spectre of communism haunting Europe, and approximately one
The old-fashioned dance teacher in Soviet Lithuania

I will start my article by presenting Lithuanian dance professor Vincas Mintaučkis (1888-1972) and his manuscript Pramoginių šokių abėcėlė (The ABC of Ballroom Dance). The author claims to have created the manuscript The ABC of Ballroom Dance as a dedication to the celebration of the fifty year anniversary of the Great October revolution. A short calculation helps determine that the manuscript was claimed to be written (or compiled) around 1967. It means that the author was around 79 years old when he finished that manuscript. Five years later Mintaučkis died, and his manuscript remains unpublished so far. Mintaučkis’ niece Laimutė Mintaučkytė-Rekašienė donated it as a gift to Jūratė and Česlovas Norvaiša many years ago. Now the manuscript is a part of their personal archive and is in the process of digitalization.

The dedication of the manuscript to the Great October revolution is not the only révérence of the author to the Soviet regime. The dance master also claims to have created new dance choreographies for that occasion – Forward, Kolchozman, Whirl, Sowing, Freedom and others. The choreographies of the dances Forward and Kolchozman are included in the manuscript. As he was probably very strongly concerned about the possibility of publication of the manuscript, Mintaučkis includes a bunch of quotations from the volumes of Marx and Engels, Lenin and other Soviet ideological gurus. For example, in order to connect his work to the ideological climate of Soviet Lithuania, Mintaučkis writes, “The decree of the party points to the need to mobilise all our efforts in order not to lag behind other educated nations, moreover, to keep up with them and to overrun them. As yet, we do not pay enough attention to the education of the art of modern ballroom dance.”

It is important that Mintaučkis discloses himself as a quite-updated dance master. It is extremely important and interesting that in his manuscript...
Mintaučkis includes a description of the Twist — the dance that became a craze in 1960s. This is an obvious sign that Mintaučkis was well informed about the fashion of social dancing, in spite of his otherwise “old-fashioned” concepts about ballroom dance. How could Mintaučkis get this information and how could he remain updated in the Soviet iron cage? There is one sheet of paper which discloses “the other identity” of Mintaučkis [see fig. 2].

In the right bottom corner Mintaučkis has written Twist (underlined in the manuscript). In the middle he suggests his own choreography of Twist (there is the note — “my own creation” on the sheet). On the top of the sheet Mintaučkis writes: “Pranešė iš Amerikos per radiją” (“It was announced from America by radio”). One could suppose that Mintaučkis found about the Twist from The Voice of America radio program, which was broadcast in Lithuanian for half an hour each week. The Voice of America was a very strong factor in supporting the social awareness of resistance to the Soviet regime in Lithuanian people during the long years of occupation. Mintaučkis was most probably following the weekly broadcasts of The Voice of America, and they

had helped him get immediate news about the latest developments in the social dance scene in the West. As separate chapters of the manuscript, Mintaučkis also includes other fashionable dances from 1960s – Letkiss (a dance of Finnish origin popularized in 1965 by Roberto Delgado) and Shake. In the above-mentioned separate sheet one could also distinguish another fashionable dance – the Watusi, which Mintaučkis wrongly decipher as the English phrase What to see.

In spite of the references to Marx, Lenin and the party and in spite of the updated and professional approach to social dance, Mintaučkis was, in a sense, a spectre in Soviet Lithuania. His old-fashioned education and approach to dance deriving from the 19th century are obvious in the manuscript. For example, Mintaučkis promotes individuality and urban locality in dance style, in contrast to unification or globalization.11 His concepts were quite far from the historical development of modern ballroom dance in the Soviet Union at the time Mintaučkis was writing or later editing his manuscript. They were closer to the decline of social couple dance than to the rise of organized DanceSport. Despite efforts of some Soviet bureaucrats to adapt modern ballroom dances to the ideology of the Soviet culture (the next chapter), modern ballroom dances attracted people from the Soviet Union, first of all, as competitive standardized dances. Standardization in DanceSport allows global or transnational competitions. To the representatives of the Soviet Union it meant mastering the dominant Western ballroom dance tradition, travelling abroad and competing with the best European couples in the same program. Mintaučkis was not so keen on the competitive aspect of ballroom dance and preferred teaching “softer” and older versions of ballroom dances based on a humanistic rather than a technical approach. As a contrast, the “hard” version of ballroom dance could be represented by the way the ballroom dance performance of Harry Smith-Hampshire (in Kremlin, 1957) was described: “With his wife, the late Doreen Casey, he became the world master on the Viennese waltz. Their speciality in this dance was a dizziness-inducing finale of 64 bars of continuous fleckerls, or 360-degree
spins on the spot, at speeds rising to 84 rotations per minute.” The latter could easily be the description of a motor rather than that of a human movement. Another example of contrast is the story of Estonian ballroom dance teacher Arseni Poolgas (1908-1972), who participated in competitions before World War II – quite successfully, in fact. Although Poolgas and Mintaučkis died in the same year (1972), the latter was much older. Mintaučkis started his career as a dance teacher when Poolgas was two years old (1910). Probably because of his respectable age in Khrushchev’s era, Mintaučkis could not find direct contact with enthusiasts of modern ballroom dance during the Soviet years. In contrast, Poolgas, after his return from Siberia (1942-1952), taught the first Estonian competitors of the Soviet years how to dance ballroom dance: Ants and Male Tael – the couple which inspired ballroom dance enthusiasts in Kaunas and Aare and Piia Orb – the first informal champions of the Soviet Union and the winners of the first Amber Couples.

**THE SOVIET IDEOLOGY OF DANCE IN ACTION**

“We have young forces that won many victories and will even more, and why shouldn’t they dance? This is the question – what kind of dances should they dance? Why should dancing necessarily be only the foxtrot? I don’t see any potential in it and I appreciate the attempt to create our own proletarian dance.”

But how should Soviet ballroom dances look? First, they should be massive. Second, they should be controlled by choreographers who should be controlled by the Ministry of Culture. Decree No. 171 of 6 April 1970, signed by the Minister of Culture of the Soviet Union, prescribed “taking all means for active implementation of the Soviet culture of dance into the daily life of youth: for the wide propagation of the best examples of new Soviet and foreign ballroom dances; to strengthen the control of programmes and repertoire of music at dance balls, evenings, etc.; for constant care of the creation of popular Soviet dances, corresponding to high ideological-artistic criteria and aesthetic norms; to attract outstanding choreographers, ballroom dance teachers, amateur artists and national dance organisations to create contemporary ballroom dances; and for systematic commissioning and booking of new dances.” The prescriptions were put into action. Hundreds of choreographies of so called national dances such as *Sudarushka*, *Russian Lyric Dance*, *Varu-varu* (Latvian), *Rylio* (Lithuanian) and many others were created for the first (1972, Moscow), and the second (1975, Kiev) official competition of modern ballroom dance in the Soviet Union. Choreographed in such style, ballroom mass-dances were an important part of Lithuanian Song and Dance festivals until 1990 (when participation of ballroom dance choreographers was prohibited). Besides choreographed mass-sambas, waltzes and tangos, one could find such optimistic dances as *Summer* (choreographer L. Tautkuvienė, music M. Tamošiūnas) and *Good Mood* (choreographer S. Idzelevičienė, music G. Miller). It was meant that ballroom dance potential and its enthusiasts would become integrated into the massive stylized Soviet dance culture. In fact, this culture was an amalgamation of several established dance traditions such as folk, ballet and ballroom. Subsequently it became a separate dance tradition with different aims. Similar transformations took place in many other countries, but they were mainly based on folk dance representations. In the Soviet Union the situation was quite unique: ballroom dance choreographers were encouraged by the large prizes in the competitions; for first prize a choreographer and a composer got 600 roubles each (second prize – 400 roubles and third – 250 roubles). On the other hand, dancers who participated in informal ten dances competitions taking place according to the global format were not allowed to dance in the official events. Especially strong pressure came from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, while the ministry of Culture of the Soviet Union was more tolerant, especially to the furthest Western part – the Baltic States. These redirecting actions had ambiguous results: they empowered the massification of ballroom dance, but at the same time they didn’t manage to reform modern ballroom dance in the Soviet Union. Finally, modern ballroom dance...
enthusiasts from the Soviet Union integrated into the worldwide DanceSport network.

In those years it was very important for ballroom dance that it was conceived as a part of cultural and artistic life in the Soviet Union, in contrast to the strong wish of Benelux countries to make it a sport. The photos of dancers were presented on the first pages or inside newspapers among publications on cultural life. The articles were never published on the last pages where traditionally sport events were reviewed. National Ministries of Culture and the Ministry of Culture of the Soviet Union as well were sure that they should take care of the development of ballroom dance – not the Committee of Sport. Despite some resonant efforts of taking over and control of pro-bourgeois activities from the early 1970s (as described above), as a phenomenon of cultural life, ballroom dance avoided the fortune of other similar phenomena of late Soviet years: yoga, bodybuilding and karate. These practices were forced to move underground. In 1972 the Committee of Sport of the Soviet Union issued the decree on the prohibition of bridge, karate, bodybuilding, and sambo (martial art) for women. Then on 24 January 1973 the Committee of Sport of the Soviet Union issued the decree on “Some facts of the wrong development of some kind of physical exercises in sport.”

In fact, all efforts to control ballroom dance and to change its direction were in reaction to the chain of events that started from the Sixth World Youth Festival in Moscow in 1957. During the event, participants danced a social waltz in (possibly) the Central Soviet Army Club. A ballroom dance competition was included into the framework of the program. Many leading Western couples were invited to the competition, including one of the best World couples at that time – Harry Smith-Hampshire and Doreen Casey. The couple performed modern ballroom dance in the Kremlin, where all members of Politburo, including Nikita Khrushchev, participated. The event provided momentum, which later resulted in the establishment of numerous clubs all over the Soviet Union – from Kaunas to Siberia. Česlovas Norvaiša in his article Parquetas ir gintaras (Parquet and Amber) remembers the story told by Anatoly and Larisa Chamritelev, the couple from Leningrad. The Chamritelevs “got an invitation from the Leningrad Committee of Komsomol to present ballroom dances in Irkutsk [Siberia]. It was winter. The temperature was below fifty degrees Celsius. However, the sport hall designed for 6.000 people was overcrowded. This lasted for two days. But there were no competition, no world champions, and no famous names. There was only one couple of enthusiasts from Leningrad and dance which found its way to the hearts people immediately.”

When the genie was let out of the bottle, nothing could stop the rising enthusiasm of ballroom dance communities and their fast growing network. In contrast to dissidents, many of whom were modernist artists, there were no contradictory statements against the ruling regime from ballroom dance communities. It was only an enthusiastic wish to practice the quickly developing art/sport, which also promised victories against Western countries – the Soviet Union’s enemies during the cold war. The authorities had to admit the potential in this development: to conquer the enemy using its own weapons. Soon after, the unofficial champions of the Soviet Union Jūratė and Česlovas Norvaiša, in exchange for a couple of ballet professionals from England, were allowed to go to London and take classes from the founder of the genre Alex Moore. A bit later the Norvaišos officially became the champions of the Soviet Union, despite the fact that the program of competition consisted of five dances, among which only two were international, another two were Soviet, and the latter was a historical ballroom dance. Finally, Lithuanians took the lead in representing the Soviet Union in multiple international competitions.

RELOADING BALLROOM IN THE SOVIET UNION?

The Republic of Lithuania from 1918 to 1940 was an unfinished project in terms of the establishment of bourgeois values and norms. It was interrupted by World War II and the Soviet occupation. Nevertheless, because the processes of modernization, urbanization and establishment of the middle class continued, the project, the same in its form, but different in its content, was implemented.
A good sign that the tendency toward establishing global urban values persisted were the efforts of challenging the establishment. For example, the hippie movement in Lithuania during the 1960s and 1970s has been widely represented in publications. The most symbolic event in the history of Kaunas during those years was the week in May 1972 when thousands of people went into the streets to celebrate the funeral (18 May 1972) of the young man Romas Kalanta who burned himself shouting “freedom to Lithuania!” (16 May 1972) as a sign of protest against the regime. The protests of the alternative culture in Western countries, as well as in the Soviet Union is quite logical and rides on the back of a long tradition, starting from the Romantic philosophy. It seems quite natural that there should be some (young) people protesting against the mainstream of technocracy such as the Green movement, Ethnocultural movement, Performance in Politics movement, etc. in contemporary society. It was important during the Soviet years and it is still important now.

Lithuanian philosopher Arūnas Sverdiolas notes: “Thus, the romantic bohemian’s intent of shocking the bourgeois is ever present. However, the dimension of norm and value is so week and inconspicuous that nobody is shocked, and in Lithuania one should look for a bourgeois, a representative of the middle class with a set of its characteristic values, in the Diogenian way: on a bright day with a torch. The nouveau riche are not bourgeois; they already have power but do not yet have corresponding values. The Lumpenproletariat, the domestic cynics, are not shocked either; they only giggle: “This is cool!”

According to Sverdiolas, a member of the bourgeoisie as a middle class representative with a set of characteristic values (for example – dances) is so rare in contemporary Lithuania. Was it also rare in late Soviet years? It is a sociological question. The quotation from Sverdiolas is important to me in quite another aspect. It is not the marginal or the alternative, but the normal, the mainstream, which has become an enigma for us. Therefore, the aim of this article is to pinpoint some common features of what had been going on in the so-called mainstream of Soviet Lithuania – the “normal”, middle part of society. In modern times this middle part of society inhabits the world of bureaucracy and technocracy. The opposing culture in Soviet years was focused on modern arts, on one hand, and deep ethnicity, on the other. But the world of engineers and technocracy involves other elements. In the sphere of dance it was ballroom style. Ligija Tautkvičienė writes that she interviewed ballroom dance teachers in one of the official competitions in Panevėžys in 1982. The results were as follows: “there were thirty coaches who prepared dancers for the competition. Among them seven people had a special higher choreographic education, seventeen had a higher and unfinished higher technical education, two had special technical education, and four had a secondary education. The situation didn’t change in 1988.”

In short, these observations make clear that during the Soviet years the scene of ballroom dance
was dominated by engineers.40 It could be supposed that there was another point of attraction generating resistance to the dominant Soviet ideology. And it was distinct from dissident activity. This point of attraction, roughly said, included such activities as yoga, martial arts, bodybuilding, and ballroom dance, to mention just some of them. It is quite an unexpected cluster of underground activities in the first view. But the cluster could be easily detected in the prohibitive efforts of the Committee of Sport of the Soviet Union.41 After some reflections it becomes obvious that there were common features in these and similar activities.42 First, they were based on enthusiasm about the exotic. The sources and legitimating forces of these exotic activities in the Soviet Union were abroad. There was no formal education which could legitimize agents inside of the Iron Curtain and no possibilities of top-down support from the State. For example, many of those who received a formal education in folk dancing later started teaching ballroom dance.43 Second, as a consequence, they were organized in the associative and/or competitive “free market”. There was no top-down control in such activities for a very long time, although people were quite well organized in the networks of clubs. The “free market” implied that the only proof of successful activity was its sustainability: the quantity of students and enthusiasts, the support offered by parents of students or students themselves and the success of competitors representing separate clubs in the competitions. And third, the key issue in these activities was self-Bildung – they implied huge efforts to build one’s embodied individuality according to an exotic standard. This extra-curricular bodily Bildung filled the gaps in the curriculum, but also filled the gaps in the ideological framework. The curriculum of physical education was focused on team sports (basketball, football etc.) and military fitness (organized around PDG norms – the norms of Readiness for Work and Defence).44 On the one hand, the philosophy of Bildung in ballroom dance, like that of yoga, Eastern martial arts or bodybuilding was different from the dominating physical education, because it was focused on individual rather than community gains. On the other hand, in spite of strong cultural backgrounds, these practices implied more technical rather than artistic challenges (at least in the first stages of practice) and therefore naturally attracted more people from technical professions, as has been shown above in the case of ballroom dance. One could still speculate to what extent this is valid for other kinds of similar activities of self-Bildung – but it is beyond the limits of this article.45 In summary, this enthusiasm about exotic bodily self-Bildung realized in free-market conditions, was not open opposition against the Soviet establishment. It was construction of the new underground establishment and preparation of the conditions under which the former philosophy of the building of Soviet life was challenged by the new philosophy of self-building. The latter philosophy appeared to be much more suitable for surviving in the free-market of post-Soviet society.

CONCLUSION

After considering the development of ballroom dance and similar phenomena in the epoch of late socialism in the Soviet Union, one could return back to the thesis of the formation of the technocratic middle class in the Soviet Union (which could be formally defined as the potential subject of bourgeois values) and its involvement in self-formative activities such as ballroom dance, martial arts, yoga, fitness, bodybuilding and others. Folk dance, continuing the rural tradition which had been left behind in the near past, could not work for a longer time as the performative identity of the new urban people, because (strangely corresponding to the dominant Soviet ideology!) these new urban people of technical professions were much less focused on nostalgic past than on the construction of their social and personal happy future. Nor could artistic dance work for these new urban people of technical professions, because artistic/theatrical dance was too much inscribed in the framework of the humanistic tradition and education and was hardly understandable to the new people of technical professions. Therefore the social logic of late Soviet life created the conditions that enabled reloading ballroom dance in Lithuania, which soon became an obvious locomotive for the whole train of communities of ballroom dance in the Soviet Union.
AESTHETICS AND THEATRICALITY OF POLITICAL REGIME(S)


34 Rimantė Tamoliūnienė (ed.), Laisvės proveržiai sovietiniame Kaune (The Breakthroughs of Freedom in Soviet Kaunas), Kaunas: Kauno apskrities viešoji biblioteka, 2007. See also ibid.

35 Ibid.


38 Rimantė Tamoliūnienė, 2007, p. 3.


40 The thesis was also confirmed in author's interview with Jūratė and Česlovas Norvaišos, 20 October 2009.

41 See references No. 31 and 32.


43 Tautkuviūnienė found 7 professional choreographers among thirty ballroom dance teachers in 1982, but she also mentions the first six people who graduated from Klaipėda faculty of Conservatorium in 1985 as professional ballroom dance choreographers. Therefore, it could be supposed, that these seven people mentioned in 1982 account were professional choreographers of either ballet or, most probably, folk dance. See Ligija Tautkuvienė, 1990, p. 24.


45 For example, Ramutis Kairaitis, current President of the Lithuanian bodybuilding and fitness federation – doctor of technical sciences. The Lithuanian title of his dissertation could be found here: http://www.mokslas.mii.lt/mokslas/SRITYS/duom00.php?pav=K&sritis=T [accessed 1 March 2010].

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Pramoginiai šokiai – buržuazijos šmėkla komunistinėje visuomenėje

Reikšminiai žodžiai: buržuazinis, modernieji pramoginiai šokiai, Sovietų Sąjungos istorija, pramoginių šokių istorija Sovietų Sąjungoje, Vincas Mintaučkis.

Santrauka

šokių entuziastų daugiausia buvo iš technologijų sričių. Tai bent iš dalies atsako į klausimą: kodėl pramoginiai šoki, kaip akivaizdi vidurinės klasės buržuazinio žmogaus išraiška, taip sėkmingai prigijo Sovietų Lietuvoje ir visoje Sovietų Sąjungoje. Dirvą tam paruošė sparti miestų raida ir vidurinėjame sovietinės visuomenės sluoksnyje vyraujantys interesai: egzotiškos kūno kultūros plitimą, pogrindinių rinkos santykių formavimą ir asmeninę savikūrą. Šiai dažniausiai technines specialybes įgijusį žmonių grupei neberūpėjo valstietijos plėtė ir dirbtinai sovietmečiu palaikoma liaudies šokių tradicija, taip pat jai nerūpėjo ir sunkiai be gilesnio humanitarinio išsilavinimo suvokiamas teatrinis šokis. Pramoginiai šokiai buvo natūraliausias pasirinkimas.