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The Case Against Rudolf Nureyev: A Legal Case Study of the KGB's Pursuits against Defectors

By Katherine Montana

|Preamble|

| *This article will investigate the legal investigation against Rudolf Nureyev that led to his defection, as well as the legal limitations placed upon him by the USSR after permanently settling in the West. It will also track the legal pursuit of restrictions against the dancer by the KGB that lasted for almost his entire life.* |

'One day, he is going to stay behind somewhere for good.'[1]

These words, spoken by the Leningrad Kirov Ballet's artistic director in 1959, could not have been more prophetic. On the trip back home from a competition in the West, rising Soviet ballet star Rudolf Nureyev accidentally missed the train from Kiev to Leningrad. Two years later, the dancer fulfilled Boris Fenster's prediction.[2]

Yet, despite the prediction by Fenster, it has been noted that Nureyev was likely not planning on defecting when he stepped on the plane from Leningrad to Paris.[3] When trying to understand why Soviet artists would want to leave and stay away from their home country, some analysts use a more retrospective viewpoint by comparing defectors' lives in the West, and noting that it was more liberating than their previous lives in the Soviet Union.[4] Though it is clear that Rudolf felt as if he was strangled artistically in the USSR, evidence suggests that it was the KGB's pursuits against him, both before, during and after his defection, were what made him decide to stay away from his country for almost the entirety of his adult life. This essay will use the story of this ballet dancer to argue that the KGB's pursuits against defectors of the Soviet Union led to many not returning to their country not simply due to wanting to continue pursuing a life in the West, but to escape their harassment and punishments.

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[1] 'Interview with Alla Osipenko', Interview by Julie Kavanagh in Julie Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev: The Life* (Great Britain, 2007), p. 76.
[2] Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 75-77
[3] Diane Solway, *Rudolf Nureyev: His Life* (New York, 1998), pp. 234-236
[4] Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 112-113; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Europe and the West: The Mitrokhin Archive* (1999, London), p. 481; 'Interview with Rudolf Nureyev', Interview by Mavis Nicholson, Thamestv, Afternoon Plus, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kczUuX285n0 [accessed 4 October 2020]

Unsurprisingly, defection was and continues to be a legal minefield. Though the defections that bridged the gap between the dramatic Cold War split of the communist East and capitalist West are no longer an issue today, defections still take place all over the world. For example, there are many cases of North Koreans defecting to South Korea, and (occasionally) vice versa.[5]

In 1961, Nureyev walked away from KGB guardsmen, informing Parisian policemen that he wanted to claim political asylum. Although a case against him had likely begun years before due to his many appreciations regarding Western culture and dismissive attitude towards Communist organizations. (He once stated to an undercover officer that the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League was not worth joining), However, it did not suddenly end when he decided to stay in France.[6] The records of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti still mostly remain a secret, yet copied reports smuggled out by other defectors and interviews with former members of the USSR allow us to paint a fairly accurate picture of the organization's proceedings against Nureyev. The complicated legalities of international law made the KGB's pursuits against Nureyev extremely complex, but the strong desire to punish the dancer's disobedience and make an example out of him inspired the organization to skirt around French laws potecting asylum seekers and begin an intricate series of pursuits to not only try to bring him home, but end his career. This intricate series of covert pursuits by the KGB is due to the fact that nine years before his defection, France had become a part of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, ensuring that an asylum seeker's 'personal status' was protected under France's laws.[7]

Born on a Russian train in 1938, Rudolf Nureyev can truly be described as a maverick. His talent for the art of dance allowed him to train with and

[5] Byung-Ho Chung, 'Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea', *Korean Studies*, 32 (2008), pp. 1-27.
[6] Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, p. 112.
[7] 'Convention relating to the Status of Refugees', *United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner*, (28 July 1951), < https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/StatusOfRefugees.aspx> [accessed 13 November 2020].

become a member of the prestigious Kirov Ballet, but his outspoken- often belligerent- and curious behaviour constantly got him into trouble. From refusing to dance unless he got to wear Western-style costumes, to openly disobeying and cursing at his instructors and superiors, Nureyev was viewed by the government as a threat. Due to the previously listed international regulations regarding political asylum seekers, there was almost nothing the KGB could do to legally force defectors home.[8] Therefore, the organization resorted to scare tactics, persuasion, threats, and physical harm to both punish and lure former USSR citizens back. Arguably, this harassment made the KGB, an organization designed to defend the Soviet Union from what was considered potentially dangerous outside influence, ironically end up encouraging citizens to defect to and remain in this outside world.[9] Rather than enticing the population to remain loyal to their country, the KGB caused great fear of potential arrests or execution, which in effect inspired those who had defected to continue to stay away. To support this argument, this essay will analyse the case and pursuits against Nureyev that not only forced him to leave his country but discouraged him from coming back. This notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy is proven by the fact that the strength of the KGB's power actively parallels Nureyev's desire to stay in the West, and with its weakening in the late 1980s, the dancer finally returned home.

Nureyev was clearly fascinated with the West, yet biographers Julie Kavanagh and Diane Solway note that this does not prove that he was necessarily planning on leaving the USSR before his sudden defection.[10] His career as a dancer in the Kirov was becoming more prominent, his connections to his family in Ufa, a city in southern Russia, were strong, and he had an intimate relationship with his dance teacher's wife, Xenia Pushkin. His ties to the Soviet Union were secure, and the potential for greater freedom in the West does not wholly explain his desire to stay away. This is evidenced by his desire over his

[8] Susan L. Carruthers, 'Between Camps: Eastern Bloc Escapees and Cold War Borderlands', *American Quarterly*, 57:3 (2005), pp. 926-928. (actual 911-942); Charles B. Keely, 'The International Refugee Regime(s): The End of the Cold War Matters', *The International Migration Review*, 35:1 (2001), pp. 303-314.
[9] Leonid Shebarshin, 'Reflections on the KGB in Russia', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28:51 (1993), p. 2829.
[10] Kavanagh, Rudolf Nureyev, p. 118; Solway, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 234-236.

years at the Kirov to bring Western-style dances and costumes to the East, proving that though he admired the West, he wanted to bring its culture to the USSR rather than simply leave his home country. Arguably, he ultimately had to be pushed to stay away for so long, and the KGB's suspicions, case, and pursuits against him achieved this.

We know that suspicions against him had begun, at minimum, a short while before he left for Paris. In an interview with the Kirov's former prima ballerina, Gabriela Komleva noted that the decision to let Nureyev go to Paris was a complicated one, for he 'always created tensions with the KGB'.[11] Additionally, when a woman in charge of observing the Kirov for its upcoming tour insisted that Nureyev was 'her star' and 'the best dancer of the world' and should be allowed to go to Paris, the Minister of Culture stated that, 'there have been some problems.'[12] Because of his talent, however, he was eventually allowed to go on tour to the West, but not without supervision from the KGB. In an interview with his friend Tamara Zakrzhevskaya, the former citizen of the USSR noted that before he even left the airport in Leningrad, Nureyev was worried that he was under suspicion.[13] When he started to blatantly ignore the rules of the tour, his file started to grow, and the KGB officer on the tour, Vitaly Strizhevsky, made snide remarks to put him down.[14] Kavanagh notes that his new friend Pierre Lacotte swears that there was no plan to keep Nureyev in the West, but the KGB wrote off Lacotte and the French police in Nureyev's trial (in which the defendant was absent) as the plotters of some kind of conspiracy that kept him away from the USSR.[15]

Arguably, this scapegoating of the French was used to shift the blame away from the KGB itself, for if they had not pushed Nureyev to the point of no return, he likely would have not continued to stay away from the Soviet Union. During the KGB's height of power, which aligned with the USSR's political and academic prominence during the Cold War, this idea of scapegoating

[11] 'Interview with Gabriela Komleva', Interview by Richard Curson Smith, BBC, *Rudolf Nureyev: Dance to Freedom*.
[12] 'Interview with Ariane Dollfus', BBC, *Rudolf Nureyev*; Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 105-106.
[13] 'Interview with Tamara Zakrzhevskaya', BBC, *Rudolf Nureyev*.
[14] Solway, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 144-146; BBC, *Rudolf Nureyev*.
[15] Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 120, 138; Solway, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 234-236

foreigners as conspirators of treasonous activity is also evident in other cases against those who were considered traitors.[16] There are several examples of this, but the most notable one references ballerina Natalia Makarova's defection to Britain nine years after Nureyev's own defection. After she defected, KGB files noted that the English media could be a culprit in her increasingly treasonous behaviour.[17] By pinning blame on foreign forces, the organization ultimately failed to acknowledge their own role in scaring defectors from returning with their intense tactics.

The KGB's pursuits against Nureyev came to a climax the day that the Kirov was going to leave Paris for the next part of their tour in London. Strizhevsky had previously reported his behaviour to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which led to the dancer being told that instead of going to London with the group, he must return to the USSR. It was then that Nureyev, understandably upset and worried, walked away from Strizhevsky and announced his plan to seek asylum. Kavanagh notes that the dancer's excitement for London with the Kirov and his panic at not being able to go proves that his defection was unplanned, and without their suspicions culminating in a case against Nureyev and rousing panic, the rising star likely would have gone back home to Leningrad.[18]

However, this was not the end of the case against him, but the beginning of a series of more nuanced and frightening approaches that arguably forced the dancer to stay away from his home. *The Mitrokhin Archive*, a series of KGB spy files smuggled out of the Soviet Union by Vasili Mitrokhin, proves this. Files note that the organization sent undercover spies to the West, who threw sharp objects on the stage during his first show in Paris, and the most sinister pursuit was an attempt to end his dancing career through physical assault.[19] Though these plots did not succeed in halting his career, it is clear that the KGB were not willing to give up on making an example of the dancer.

[16] Mark Solovey, 'Introduction: Science and the State During the Cold War: Blurred Boundaries and a Contested Legacy', *Social Studies of Science*, 31:2 (2001), pp. 165-170.
[17] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Europe and the West*, pp. 481-482.
[18] Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, p. 120.
[19] Ibid., pp. 9, 480-481.

With the rise of these strong and harsh approaches by the KGB towards Nureyev, the star's desire to go back home arguably diminished more and more. Though there is evidence he missed his family and friends in the USSR, the KGB's tactical pursuits that dodged international legal restrictions arguably scared him from returning. One of these attempts by the KGB was to lure him home. Mitrokhin notes that in directing those close to him to write letters that would purposefully make him homesick, the KGB hoped he would decide to come back to the Soviet Union.[20] Ironically, this approach actually pushed him further away, for Nureyev suspected that these letters suggested insincerity. In fact, it has been noted that his friend from East Germany wrote a follow up letter to the ones that begged him to come home that told Nureyev that in actuality, it was not ideal for him to return.[21]

Evidenced by Mitrokhin's smuggled notes and statistics, the KGB's power increased under the steady control of First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s, which allowed the organization to subsequently increase pressure on its defectors.[22] Throughout the later years of Nureyev's career in the West, which coincided with the decline of the Communist Party and KGB's power in the East, his desire to return home proved stronger. This diminishment in power is evidenced by Mitrokhin noting that in later years, plots against artistic defectors weakened, and aggressive pursuits were no longer seen as essential.[23] This displays the notion that the KGB's pursuits to both punish the ballet star and bring him home actually pushed him away, and their declined efforts due to the slow dissolving of the USSR's power allowed Nureyev to finally feel comfortable to ask to return. In 1987, First Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev was informed that Nureyev wanted to return home to say goodbye to his mother.[24] By allowing this visit during the years that the KGB and Communist Party were growing weaker, Gorbachev proved that the intensity of the case and pursuits against the dancer were in fact what ultimately kept him away from his home.

[20] Ibid., pp. 480-481.
[21] Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, pp. 206-207.
[22] Amy Knight, 'The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 5:1 (2003), pp. 67-69; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, pp. 9-10.
[23] Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, pp. 727-728.
[24] Francis X. Clines, 'For Nureyev, An 'Inevitable' Return Home', *The New York Times*, New York City, 15 November 1987, p. 4 < https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/15/world/for-nureyev-an-inevitable-return-home.html> [accessed 10 October 2020].

Rudolf Nureyev's case, as well as the legal approaches that the KGB used against him and other defectors, proves that defections were, and continue to be, extremely complicated affairs. Likely due to his understanding of the extent of the KGB's power in the 1960s, the dancer acknowledged that though he knew his decision to defect would likely be a permanent one, it did not necessarily mean he would be content in the West.[25] The amount of power that the organization held, which directly parallels the forcefulness of approaches against both potential defectors and those who had already left the Soviet Union, ultimately depreciated with the slow collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s, letting cases grow cold and approaches grow warmer. Despite the pursuits against him and his unpatriotic attitude towards the USSR, the country was ultimately his home, and his strong connections with his friends, family and hometown were proved when he jumped at the chance to say goodbye.

[25] Spoken to Patrick Thevenon, *Paris-Jour*, 21 June 1961 in Kavanagh, *Rudolf Nureyev*, p. 147.

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