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Dose of Oppression to Save Russian Culture

By Richard Lourie

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I▣am usually a little foggy in the morning, so I had to shake my head extra hard at a front-page story in the Nov. 15 Arts section of The New York Times titled, "Bolshoi Is Stung by Loss of 2 Stars."▣

The word "defection" leaped up at me from the second paragraph before I'd even read the first.▣

What?!▣

Had things turned so full circle that dancers were defecting again a la Nureyev and Baryshnikov?▣

But then I forced myself to focus on the lead paragraph where I learned that the dancers were only "defecting" from the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow to the Mikhailovsky Theater in St.

Petersburg.

Though their motivation was the same as that of their Soviet counterparts — a desire for more "artistic freedom" — the real news was that this could now be accomplished by merely moving from one Russian city to another.

Like many others, I thought an end to the oppression of artists in Russia would lead to something of a renaissance.

Nothing of the sort has happened in the 20 years since the Soviet collapse. A lot of things emerged from the Russian psyche when the lid was removed, but great art wasn't one of them.

Maybe that was even good.

For two centuries Russia had plenty of great art, especially literature and music, and precious little of anything else great or even good.

The Russian novel had carried too great a burden — to inform, inspire, entertain, enlighten. Suddenly, there was the Internet, good movies and television, and freedom of spiritual experience —all of which drew energy and attention away from the arts.

But it turns out that the social mission of Russian art may not be quite over yet. When tsarist Russia collapsed in 1917, the Bolsheviks were waiting in the wings armed not only with Mausers and Marxism, but also with a whole new culture from symbols to songs.

There was no such contingent in the wings when Soviet Russia collapsed. Most were stunned, some fled, and a few, quick on their feet, set about looting the system.

No new culture has arisen in the void left by the Soviet Union's implosion, which is why today's Russia flies a tsarist flag and sings its new national anthem to a Soviet tune.

Russia has critical problems that it must resolve to avoid collapsing again. The judiciary must become more independent, the political opposition and media freer and the economy more diversified.

But the country must also forge a new identity for itself. To some degree that will emerge from the struggle to resolve the country's problems, but art has a serious role to play in the process as well.

Art can be an icon that inspires, a mirror that reveals the harsh truth. Stories in books or on the screen can provide a variety of scenarios from best case to worst. Sometimes a movie can define a generation.

No one knows why cultural rebirths occur in a particular place at a particular time: 15th-, 16th-century Italy, 19th-century Russia, Paris of the early 20th century.

Russia has a deep need for a cultural rebirth, for new images of national identity. Perhaps the state will obligingly provide the dose of oppression Russian culture seems to thrive on.

It's perfectly possible that the next 12 years of Vladimir Putin's reign could see a renaissance

in Russia.

Why not? The Medicis weren't such nice people either.

Richard Lourie is author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

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