

Russian Tsar's Love Life Sparks Cinema Censorship Row

Months before its release, the film "Mathilde" has Orthodox activists crying blasphemy

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"Mathilde," a film about Tsar Nicholas II's affair with a Polish ballerina, has become a source of controversy between filmmakers and religious activists. **Kinopoisk.ru**

A graceful ballet dancer glides across the stage. Suddenly, the shoulder strap on her outfit gives way, revealing — just for a brief moment — a naked breast.

In the audience, a man drops his opera glasses in shock. He is Nicholas II, the last Russian tsar.

The film "Mathilde," which tells the story of a love affair between Polish ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska and the young tsar, will hit the big screen in October. But scenes like this one, featured in the trailer, have already sparked tensions between Orthodox believers and the

Russian arts establishment.

The heart of the issue is that Nicholas II and his family — killed by the Bolsheviks in 1918 — were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000. Some say that depicting them in a less-than-holy light is an attack on a saint.

Crimean Duma Deputy Natalya Poklonskaya has called the affair between the ballerina and the tsar “fabricated.” She has twice appealed to state prosecutors to investigate whether the film insults the feelings of religious believers.

In the meantime, Orthodox activists have taken matters into their own hands. This month, a vigilante group called Christian State — Holy Russia sent a letter to dozens of cinema managers. They made explicit threats that if the managers showed the film “cinemas would burn, maybe people will even suffer.”

The conflict has filmmakers crying censorship. But it has also left many wondering how an otherwise innocuous historical romance film could spark such a controversy.

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Nicholas and Kschessinska’s affair is a documented fact, and has never before been seen as particularly scandalous. It lasted only a year and ended a few weeks before Nicholas’s engagement to Alix of Hesse, a German princess and the future tsarina, says Coryne Hall, author of the book “Imperial Dancer: Mathilde Kschessinska and the Romanovs.”

After Nicholas’ marriage, Kschessinska stayed on the scene and even struck up a relationship with other royals. But her romantic relationship with the tsar was over. She remained a controversial figure in the court, but her liaison with Nicholas was never seen as damaging to his reputation, Hall says.

“He was young. She was practically throwing herself at him. What do people expect?”

There is also nothing contradictory between the affair and Nicholas’s canonization, says Alexander Baunov, a senior associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank.

People like Poklonskaya are making a mistake in their understanding of the nature of holiness, he says: “The saints have different pasts, and their sainthood is often connected to overcoming one’s sins.”

Christian State — Holy Russia doesn’t dispute the fact that some saints had deeply sinful pasts. But the film is “provocation on a national scale” and could be destabilizing for Russia, Miron Kravchenko, a representative of the organization, told The Moscow Times.

Kravchenko says that activists are not, in fact, threatening to burn down movie theaters. Rather, they “have information” that some offended citizens “may be planning violent protest.” Christian State — Holy Russia, he says, is trying to prevent tragedy.

But not everyone sees benevolence in the activists’ actions. Earlier this week, a group of nearly 70 film directors released an “open letter” decrying efforts to censor “Mathilde.”

“We don’t want our culture to fall under under the weight of new censorship, no matter how powerful the forces that initiate it,” they wrote. The directors compared the situation to a recent scandal surrounding the staging of the Tannhauser opera and an attack on an exhibit by Vadim Sidur.

“In all these cases, the actors are so-called ‘Orthodox activists,’ but the Church doesn’t take a stand on what’s happening,” they wrote. “At best, the Culture Ministry waits [the scandal] out.”

On Feb. 8, Alexei Uchitel, the film’s director, also filed complaint against Deputy Poklonskaya and Christian State with the state prosecutor. "On the one hand there is some PR value in all of the controversy ... but when threats are being made, I'll protest such action every step of the way," Uchitel told The Moscow Times.

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Supporters of the film have some reason to worry. Orthodox activists successfully blocked a performance of Tannhauser, and the people who smashed sculptures by Sidur received little more than a slap on the wrist in court. And while the state views the activists actions as “unpleasant interference,” previous incidents show that the authorities tend to “tolerate it until these groups cross into violence,” says political analyst Baunov.

But the state offered something of an olive branch to the film’s supporters. The same day that Uchitel filed his complaint, Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov denounced the “extremists” threatening the film and labeled their actions “unacceptable.” At the same time, Peskov also called for “mutual responsibility,” saying that the “artists must explain that they have no intention to insult the feelings of others.”

Whatever the final fate of "Mathilde," the controversy is proving one line of the film true. “You’re the Tsar, you have a right to everything,” a voice in the trailer says. “Except for love.”

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