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Time to Face the Music:

Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony and the Siege of Leningrad

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In the wake of dramatic socio-political developments sweeping the newly transformed Soviet Union, Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich (1906–1975) found himself in some of the 20th century's most devastating epochs. It was in his music that Shostakovich's expressed his thoughts and feelings about the radically evolving political landscape of the time. The young composer's perception of the world around him would forever be shaped by, foremostly, the Bolshevik Revolution. Bolshevism and Stalin's subsequent inheritance of the USSR promulgated a refashion of the arts, forcing Shostakovich to think outside the box. He needed to be an instrument of the state in order to avoid being a victim. It was during Hitler's Siege of Leningrad that Shostakovich, ironically, did not feel like a victim but the custodian of a powerful weapon that dared to defy forces beyond his comprehension. In response to Hitler's Bolshevik crusade, Shostakovich would launch an ideological crusade of his own, composed through the medium of a symphony.

Informed by his lessons in the composition of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and *The Limpid Stream*, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 appeased Stalin striking a perfect balance between his artistic inclinations and adherence to socialist realism. It would set an ideological

and artistic precedent in the composition of Symphony No. 7. The Leningrad, as it came to be called, served as a reminder for the Allies that in the face of the “godless, fanatical, and hostile” forces besieging the city, the Soviets nevertheless maintained their humanity.<sup>1</sup> The fate of Poland, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the dismemberment of the Baltic states, and Stalinist terror had given the Allies every reason to hold the Soviets as antithetical to Western values. The Allies desperately wanted to believe in the humanity and decency of their new ally.<sup>2</sup> Against the backdrop of a sagging American campaign in Guadalcanal and the British loss of Tobruk, the Soviets achieved “moral redemption.”<sup>3</sup> Shostakovich’s composition became a cornerstone of the Soviet propaganda machine, emerging as a Soviet anti-fascist anthem. Shostakovich intended his score to exemplify the soul of Leningrad, its spirit of resistance, and his love for his city. In its multivalence, Symphony No. 7 could never be reduced to a single meaning or theme. It is in its symbolism of totalitarian resistance that it would become the “diary of a nation,” “due not only to what the composer put into it, also to what it enabled listeners to draw out.”<sup>4</sup> Faced with Allied disillusionment, Shostakovich composed a piece that allowed Stalin to draw out the desperately needed evidence of Soviet humanity, propagandized to validate the Union’s accomplishments while giving the public an anxiously awaited anthem of resistance, which would strengthen the morale of the besieged in Leningrad. Simply put, Shostakovich’s war symphony served as a weapon for Stalin, a shield for the Soviets, and a lifeline for the besieged in Leningrad.

Shostakovich distinguished himself early on as a prodigy of classical composition. Dmitri inherited a musical tradition within the Shostakovich household. He was quick to realize that

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Notes* 50, no. 2 (1993): 760.

“the notes just stayed in [his] memory by themselves” and that in addition to being able to “sight read well,” he embarked on his “first attempts at composition.”<sup>5</sup> During the outbreak of the Revolution, the young prodigy played his “Funeral March for the Victims of the Revolution” on piano at a memorial service held at his sisters’ school. Originally written to lament the death of revolutionaries killed by the tsar’s police, Shostakovich also played the piece to honour the deaths of the policemen at the hands of revolutionaries.<sup>6</sup> A single piece of music capable of honouring two opposing forces reverberated in Shostakovich’s Symphony No.5 and, most significantly, No. 7. Soon after his matriculation in the newly renamed Petrograd Conservatoire, he was quick to defy authority through his music in favor of artistic integrity. Shostakovich pretended to rewrite his piano suite at the request of his professor at the Conservatoire, only to reveal that “after the concert, [he] destroyed the corrected version and set about restoring the original.”<sup>7</sup> He felt inhibited by what he called the “dictatorship of rules,” which could limit artistic creativity and “cripple people.”<sup>8</sup> His “revolt” and ingenuity catapulted him into the public eye but paved the way for an antagonistic relationship with Joseph Stalin.

The first production of *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* premiered against a backdrop of intensified political purges spurred by the orchestrated assassination of Sergei Kirov (1886–1934), the First Secretary of the Leningrad Regional Committee and a close confidant of Stalin’s. Such terror marked the beginning of the first Siege of Leningrad.<sup>9</sup> Stalin had a unique hatred for the city. Its artistic history, sophisticated legacy, and independence of mind subjected

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (Faber: London, 1994), 10.

<sup>6</sup> M. T Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad* (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2017), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Laurel E. Fay, Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich, and Leonid Maksimenkov, *Shostakovich and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich and His World*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 110.

it to just as much Stalinist violence as it did to Nazi aggression. As a result, it became “the most defiled of all Soviet cities.”<sup>10</sup>

Leningrad was the cultural and historic jewel of the Soviet Union. Much of Russia’s surviving cultural and intellectual elite called Leningrad home, and the people of Leningrad had pride in this historical heritage. Formerly St. Petersburg, the imperial capital of the Russian Empire, Leningrad occupied a unique position in the Soviet political psyche. As the symbolic capital of the Russian Revolution, Stalin obfuscated the city’s identity, renaming it Leningrad as a means of laying revolutionary and Bolshevik ownership to the site.<sup>11</sup> The symbolism of Leningrad, founded on its imperial legacy, intellectual prestige, and enduring site of revolution, placed it increasingly at odds with the political importance of Moscow. The city enamoured Adolf Hitler, who perceived it as a “citadel of revolution and the birthplace of his enemy.”<sup>12</sup> It served as the primary objective in Hitler’s crusade against Bolshevism. Where others saw a city, he saw the soul of Russia.

Eclipsed by the early triumphs of his Symphony No. 1, his second symphony titled *To October*, and Symphony No. 3, *The First of May*, Shostakovich’s opera, *Lady Macbeth*, marked a turning point in his career. In fact, it put him in Stalin’s crosshairs. A tale based on Nikolai Leskov’s work, the tragic and satirical opera displays a bored and unfulfilled housewife who murders her husband and father-in-law in concert with her lover. The dark themes, sexually charged music, and anti-climactic murder-suicide caused something of a scandal when it debuted in 1934. Nevertheless, it was met with overwhelming critical acclaim. It did so well that Stalin attended a 1936 production at the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow. Shostakovich stood in attendance,

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<sup>10</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> David M. Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad: 1941-1944* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 6.

keenly aware of his presence throughout the performance. He, who was as “white as a sheet,”<sup>13</sup> lamented that he “had a feeling that this year, all leap years, will be bad for [him].”<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, he was right. Stalin and his entourage, Molotov and Zhdanov, took their leave after the third act, seemingly offended at the “mess” that constituted Shostakovich’s opera.<sup>15</sup> A few days later, an unsigned review criticizing Shostakovich’s premier of *Lady Macbeth* emerged. It faulted the composer for “formalism,” straying away from socialist realism, which stressed that “the main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful.”<sup>16</sup> Entitled “Muddle Instead of Music,” the January 28, 1936 edition of *Pravda*, the Soviet propaganda machine’s mouthpiece, accused Shostakovich of failing “to reflect the class struggle and the heroism of workers and peasants” in his opera.<sup>17</sup> His “formalist” work constituted a Western-influenced piece that pandered to the elite and was incomprehensible to the people. In effect, he failed to honour the “aesthetic mandate,” a style couched in an ideological and political “discourse of victorious socialism.”<sup>18</sup>

The criticisms did not stop there as *Pravda* followed the attack challenging Shostakovich’s score in the ballet, *The Limpid Stream*. Described as a “slick and high-handed” fraud who saw the Soviet masses as “sugary peasants” from a “pre-revolutionary chocolate box,” Shostakovich finally understood the political limitations of his artistic craft.<sup>19</sup> He would never

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 32. Shostakovich biographer Elizabeth Wilson suggests that the article was most likely the work of journalist and high-ranking party official David Zaslavsky and that its attribution to Stalin is likely apocryphal. Nevertheless, *Pravda* served as the Party’s mouthpiece, disseminating official Stalinist, and by extension, Soviet rhetoric. See Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Padgett, “The Dialectic of Musical Socialist Realism: The Case of Dmitri Shostakovich,” *Transcultural Studies (Idyllwild, Calif.)* 9, no. 1 (2013): 103.

<sup>19</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 32.

again score a ballet as he implicitly recognized that public civic censure came from the top down. The threat enumerating that the composer “was playing a game” that “may end very badly” reminded Shostakovich that fame or status did not grant him immunity from Stalin’s terror. The oppressive political climate of the epoch demoralized Shostakovich, but he nevertheless carried on with Symphony No. 4, discontinuing his work only at the request of the Philharmonic director. It would only be premiered some ten years after Stalin’s death.<sup>20</sup> He recognized that such criticisms were not only career-damaging but also life-threatening. The prospect of being subjected to the purges became increasingly plausible as time passed. Few were spared from Stalin’s purges, and Shostakovich’s screenwriter was among the victims. Implicated for conspiring against Kirov, Raya Vasilyeva’s name appeared in *Pravda*, and she was executed soon after.<sup>21</sup> Stalin stopped short of having Shostakovich arrested, but the political climate reverberated intensely within his psyche. When it came to music, the cultural commissars stood conflicted. The totalitarian apparatus of the Soviet system concerned itself with every aspect of life. They sensed that music could be a valuable tool in service to the state, but could it be trusted to tow the party line? After all, controlling a composer’s voice was easy, but controlling his art was not. The rhetoric consigned Shostakovich’s subsequent years and productions towards a long, upwards struggle for state acceptance.<sup>22</sup>

A now tainted Shostakovich seemingly succumbed to the political pressures from above to conform, as shown in the composition of his fifth symphony. Cast into disgrace, Shostakovich would redeem himself with a simplified symphony designed to suit the prescriptions of socialist

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<sup>20</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth A. Wells, “‘The New Woman’: Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13, no. 2 (2001): 163.

realism, reflecting that he had “seen his errors” and improved accordingly.<sup>23</sup> Informally and ironically subtitled “A Soviet Artist’s Practical and Creative Response to Just Criticism,” Symphony No. 5 retained its tragic undertones, not entirely giving into the demands of socialist realism despite appeasing Stalin.<sup>24</sup> As Shostakovich suffered under Stalin, so too did ordinary Soviets. In its Leningrad premiere in 1937, this “was a song for all their dead.”<sup>25</sup> Despite official canonization, Shostakovich did not wholly fulfill the aesthetic requirements of socialist realism but succeeded in creating a socialist realist narrative founded upon personal ideology.<sup>26</sup> The vast, lumbering celebration punctuated with blasting drums and a heavy bass culminating in a screaming triumph did not have a universal interpretation. Where critics saw a piece of artistic salvation, the public saw an expression of suffering.<sup>27</sup> After realizing the dangers of his creative antics, Shostakovich’s fifth symphony put him back in the good graces of the Politburo. In Shostakovich’s apparent capitulation, Stalin had proved his point. He was able to control artists, turning Shostakovich into an agent of the state and a national asset. However, given his rehabilitated image, Shostakovich was no longer watched as closely. His restricted freedom necessitated a composition formula fitting the socialist realist style while retaining the subliminal undertones that allowed Shostakovich’s music to resonate with the masses. Unfortunately, the composer unearthed such creative brilliance during one of the most brutal campaigns of the Second World War. Shostakovich’s fate would come to be intertwined with that of Peter and Lenin’s City during Hitler’s Siege of Leningrad.

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Maes, Arnold Pomerans, and Erica Pomerans, *A History of Russian Music: from Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 304.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> Pauline Fairclough, “Was Soviet Music Middlebrow? Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, Socialist Realism, and the Mass Listener in the 1930s,” *The Journal of Musicology* (St. Joseph, Mich.) 35, no. 3 (2018), 364.

<sup>27</sup> Maes, *A History of Russian Music*, 353.



In Directive No 21, issued on December 18, 1940, Hitler outlined his plans to invade the Soviet Union. Codenamed Operation Barbarossa, the attack required the simultaneous mobilization of three army groups intended for three primary objectives, Leningrad, Moscow, and Kyiv.<sup>28</sup> Field Marshal Ritter Von Leeb (1876–1956) commanded Army Group North with the mission to advance along the Leningrad axis and destroy Red Army forces in the Baltic region before capturing Leningrad.<sup>29</sup> Nazi High Command provided Von Leeb with two armies, the Sixteenth and the Eighteenth. Spearheaded by the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Group, it became clear that Von Leeb’s Army Group North emerged significantly over-extended along the lines of attack.<sup>30</sup> The speed, ferocity, and organization of the German assault overwhelmed the opposing Baltic Command,<sup>31</sup> yet “the sickening progress” undertaken by Army Group North was met by fierce opposition around Luga.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Von Leeb’s forces captured Kingisepp and Narva before reaching Chudovo a few days later, severing the rail link between Moscow and Leningrad.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of the mobilization of over a million citizens organized by the Council of Deputies of the Leningrad administration, the 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Group secured the successful capture of Ostrov, the invasion of Pskov, and the advance on Novgorod.<sup>34</sup> General Von Leeb, confident in Leningrad’s imminent surrender, penetrated the Northwestern Front compelling an enemy retreat back towards the city. However, due to a change in priorities, Leeb, having reached the Neva, was told he would be deprived of his prized 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer division in favour of Army Group Centre for a renewed offensive against Moscow. In late-August, the Germans

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<sup>28</sup> David M. Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1944: 900 Days of Terror* (Osceola, Wis: MBI Pub. Co., 2001), 21.

<sup>29</sup> Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 106.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 254.

<sup>33</sup> Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad*, 46.

<sup>34</sup> Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad*, 59.

severed the final rail link separating Leningrad from the “mainland.” The city was now besieged. However, evacuation efforts had begun in anticipation of the campaign, but only a little over 600,000 civilians were removed from a population of over three million, beginning the longest siege in recorded history.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, for Hitler, while Leningrad served as the primary base for the Soviet Baltic Fleet, its importance stretched far beyond its military value. The fate of Leningrad had become directly intertwined with national pride and morale. “Following the city’s encirclement,” Hitler had no interest in maintaining “even a part of this very large urban population” and, thus, ordered its destruction.<sup>36</sup>

By no means an ideologically motivated Soviet, Shostakovich was nevertheless a strong patriot. In the wake of Molotov’s announcement informing the citizens of Leningrad of the impending war, Shostakovich, along with 100,000 Soviets, volunteered to take up arms.<sup>37</sup> However, leading cultural figures like Shostakovich would serve a more useful purpose behind the frontlines. After being rejected from service, supposedly due to his poor eyesight, Shostakovich served in the fire brigade, where he was delegated to put out fires after air raids. During this time, he began work on his Symphony No. 7. By mid-July 1941; his work had consumed him. He composed quickly because “war was all around. [He] had to be together with the people, [he] wanted to create the image of our embattled country, to engrave it in music.”<sup>38</sup> Undoubtedly driven by his pride in the citizens of Leningrad, Shostakovich was no stranger to dictatorial terror and spurned offers of evacuation. He remained in the city for as long as he could; however, by October 1941, the situation became increasingly desperate. The authorities ordered Shostakovich to evacuate the city by air so as not to risk losing one of their most

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<sup>35</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 295-6.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Reid, *Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941-1944* (New York: Walker & Co., 2011), 134-135.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 245.

<sup>38</sup> Fay, *Shostakovich and His World*, 124.

prominent artists.<sup>39</sup> In a bid to reassure the citizens of Leningrad, Shostakovich's radio address stated that "the life of our city is going on normally. All of us now carry our military burdens."<sup>40</sup> He completed the symphony in Kuibyshev, where it witnessed its world premiere on March 5, 1942.<sup>41</sup>

In a letter to a confidant, Shostakovich stated that "idle critics will no doubt reproach me for imitating Ravel's *Bolero*. Well, let them, for this is how I hear the war."<sup>42</sup> While Stalin owned his image, he could never own the composer's musical statements. Nevertheless, for the Soviet mindset, the cultural value placed on the symphony proved fruitful. "It cleansed the image of the Soviets," attributing the Soviet experience not to the repression of thinkers and artists but to the preservation of cultural values.<sup>43</sup> For Shostakovich, the polysemous nature of the music gave him a "tremendous advantage; without mentioning anything, it [said] everything."<sup>44</sup>

Critical reception regarded the piece as crude, lengthy, bombastic, and lacking in subtlety. Despite the negative reviews, the British and American propaganda machines heralded the symphony as a symbol of Western-Soviet unity. The potential for Soviet propaganda was immense. Shostakovich's Seventh had come to the United States with an unbelievable story.<sup>45</sup> Composed under Nazi besiegement and microfilmed in Moscow, the score made its way by rail to Kuibyshev, by plane to Tehran, by automobile to Cairo, and finally, by aircraft to the United States via South America.<sup>46</sup> The score's dramatic journey through occupied territory frequently

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, *Shostakovich*, 172.

<sup>40</sup> Salisbury, *The 900 Days*, 284.

<sup>41</sup> Reid, *Leningrad*, 639.

<sup>42</sup> Isaak Glikman, *Story of Friendship: The Letters of Dmitri Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman 1941-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>43</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 315.

<sup>44</sup> Solomon Volkov, and Antonina W. Bouis, *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship Between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 246-7.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolas Slonimsky, "Dmitri Dmitrievitch Shostakovich," *The Musical Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (October 1942): 439.

<sup>46</sup> "Symphony," *The New Yorker* 18, July 18, 1942, 9.

appeared in the American media. Most notably in *The New York Times*, where Shostakovich described his fourth and final movement as “the victory of light over darkness, of humanity over barbarism.”<sup>47</sup> The music familiarized the experiences of the Soviets in the Great Patriotic War in the American political and public consciousness. As a result, the symphony strengthened the tenuous wartime Allied-Soviet alliance.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, its performances were as much musical as they were political.<sup>49</sup> The music “hid the camps and the interrogation chambers. The Soviets were not only civilized and cultured: they were also upholders of human freedom.”<sup>50</sup>

The New York premiere coincided with a stylized image of Shostakovich in his fireman uniform on the cover of the *Time Magazine*'s July 20, 1942, edition. The rights to its production sparked something of a battle royal between Leopold Stokowski, and Arturo Toscanini.<sup>51</sup> Toscanini's National Broadcasting Company's Symphony Orchestra (NBC) lobbied the Soviet embassy for the rights to the performance. His efforts earned him “the most talked-of musical event of the year.”<sup>52</sup> The symphony's New York premiere in July 1942 received “an ovation, which lasted for a good ten minutes, of a shouting, cheering audience which rose to its feet.”<sup>53</sup> In its distribution throughout the United States, the symphony transported the audience to the site of the siege, recast their Soviet allies in a new and positive light, and promulgated a myth of heroism for the besieged in Leningrad. For Stalin, the symphony distinguished itself as an avenue of rapport, a means of détente, and an opportunity for friendship.<sup>54</sup> In a letter to Stalin,

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<sup>47</sup> Ralph Parker, “Shostakovich, Composer, Explains His Symphony of Plain Man in War,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1942.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence P. MacCurtain, “Rhapsody in Red: Shostakovich and American Wartime Perceptions of the Soviet Union,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 47, no. 4-5 (2013): 366.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Notes* 50, no. 2 (1993), 758.

<sup>50</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 474.

<sup>51</sup> Reid, *Leningrad*, 641.

<sup>52</sup> “Premiere of the Year,” *Newsweek* 20, no. 4, July 27, 1942, 66.

<sup>53</sup> Olin Downes, “Shostakovich Seventh Receives First U.S. Concert Premiere,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 1942, 12.

<sup>54</sup> MacCurtain, “Rhapsody in Red,” 364.

Roosevelt stated, “Stalingrad and Leningrad have become synonymous for the fortitude and endurance which has enabled us to resist and will finally enable us to overcome the aggression of our enemies.”<sup>55</sup>

The Seventh’s most poignant premiere was held in the city itself. However, the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra had been evacuated, and remnants of musical talent were pulled from the Leningrad Radio Orchestra. To say the Leningrad premiere of the Seventh Symphony occurred under duress would be putting it mildly. In an *Izvestiya* article published on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1942, Shostakovich declared his “dream” for his 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony to be “performed before long in the beloved city that inspired [him] to create.”<sup>56</sup> The international anticipation for the 7<sup>th</sup> began to shift the American wartime perception of Shostakovich, and by extension, of the Soviets. *Time Magazine* described Shostakovich as a “fire fighter, a trench digger, and an embattled citizen like themselves.”<sup>57</sup> However, staging a performance would be easier said than done. A note from the rehearsal logbook revealed that: “rehearsal did not take place. Srabian is dead. Petrov is sick. Borishev is dead. Orchestra not working.”<sup>58</sup> In defiance of these odds, efforts were underway to gather musicians from the frontlines and amongst the citizens of Leningrad as the score required an expanded orchestra of 100 players. Karl Eliasberg (190–1978), the production’s conductor, staged rehearsals despite the dwindling reserves of musicians. A report from the Radiokom director read: “The first violin is dying, the drum died on his way to work, the French horn is at death’s door.”<sup>59</sup> Given the circumstances, Eliasberg took it upon himself to mobilize musicians by going door to door to incentivize those who could not

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<sup>55</sup> ‘U.S. honors heroic cities’, *The New York Times*, June 28, 1944, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 313.

<sup>57</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 314.

<sup>58</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 472.

<sup>59</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 269-70.

respond to the orchestra's reassembly with promises of increased rations. Starvation, illness, and exhaustion meant that only one full rehearsal was performed just three days before the concert.

The rise and fall and rise again of Shostakovich's reputation mirrored the political developments plaguing the Soviet Union. Still, such a feat promised to consolidate his national prestige and create a psychological point from which all Soviets could rally around and resist the Nazi invasion.<sup>60</sup> Hitler had previously designated the 9<sup>th</sup> of August as the day to celebrate the fall of Leningrad. It was also on this day that the Seventh was performed. However, according to a Russian proverb, "when the guns speak, the muses fall silent." Operation Squall, an offensive undertaken by the Red Army, ensured the silence of Nazi forces besieging the city with continuous bombardments of artillery fire, long enough for a live broadcast to those still suffering in Leningrad. The "symphonic artillery" held the besieging German forces "under continuous fire for a total of two hours and 30 minutes. The result? Not a single shell fell on the streets of Leningrad."<sup>61</sup> The barrages ensured that Leningrad's most powerful weapon would be employed without issue. The music propelled the morale of the besieged but also operated as a means of psychological warfare as it was broadcasted on loudspeakers for the besieging forces. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, the citizens of Leningrad received a massive morale boost, which, for their German assailants, is just as much a demoralizing lesson in the power of art. Shostakovich poured his experiences and impressions of the fighting into the music he wrote, concluding a bombastic piece of sacrifice. The music undoubtedly told "a story of sublime heroism, of unquenchable faith in victory."<sup>62</sup> Conducted by a dystrophic Eliasberg, the ensemble of starved

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<sup>60</sup> Noah Andre Trudeau, "A Symphony of War," *The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 25-6.

<sup>61</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 480.

<sup>62</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre: R46/297: Leningrad Symphony 1942-44. Quoted in Anna Reid, *Leningrad: Tragedy of a City Under Siege, 1941-44* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 641.

musicians performed the 80-minute-long piece in a packed hall. The trombonist Mikhail Parfionov was “stunned by the number that turned out.”<sup>63</sup> Where some were reported to have wept during the lackluster performance, during the final movement, others found it “impossible to listen sitting down.”<sup>64</sup>

After receiving an hour-long ovation, the conductor concluded that “in that moment, we triumphed over the soulless Nazi war machine.”<sup>65</sup> “Leningrad,” both the symphony and the city, stood as a testament to a people that “Stalin destroyed, and that Hitler merely finished off.”<sup>66</sup>

Structured in four parts, the symphony’s first movement, “War,” introduces the audience to a peaceful life in the USSR through lyrical melodies. A distant drumming noise increasingly overwhelms a solo violin, representing the fascist invasion. The drum grows every so brashly in tune with military drums designed to create a sense of anxiety for an impending outcry of horror, exemplified by a solo flute grieving the dead.<sup>67</sup> Entitled “Memories,” the second movement retains its subtle tragic undertone while evoking a reliving of happier memories. The third movement, “Wide Expanses of Our Land,” alluding to Russia’s natural beauty, affirms the spirit of heroism within its inhabitants. This “movement is a dialogue between the chorale, the solace given by the splendour of the homeland, and the solo voice – the violins, the individual in torment.”<sup>68</sup> The final movement, “Victory,” serves as both an assurance to the people of Leningrad and a prelude to an inevitable triumph in the Great Patriotic War. The movement encapsulates an audience with its amalgamation of various political, cultural, and military forces

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<sup>63</sup> Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, 496.

<sup>64</sup> Reid, *Leningrad*, 646.

<sup>65</sup> Michael K Jones, *Leningrad: State of Siege* (London: John Murray, 2008), 261.

<sup>66</sup> Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich, and Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (London: H. Hamilton, 1979), 156.

<sup>67</sup> Jenny Farrell, “The Siege of Leningrad: Shostakovich and the airbrushing of history,” *People’s World*, June 26, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Farrell, “The Siege of Leningrad: Shostakovich and the airbrushing of history,” *People’s World*, June 26, 2019.

exhibited throughout a melody that “marches, fights, and resists.”<sup>69</sup> The upbeat final chords punctuated by clashing cymbals grounded in desperation show that victory is only won with sacrifice.

Shostakovich's legacy oscillates between a secret voice of conscience and a state accomplice to deception. “Under the old Soviet dispensation,” Stalin claimed the meanings and intentions of Shostakovich, but there have been attempts to return ownership to the composer.<sup>70</sup> Volkov stated in an interview that he “always senses intuitively in [the music] a protest against the regime.” However, despite the revisionist interpretation of Shostakovich, “in a regime where words are watched, lies are rewarded, and silence is survival, there is no truth.”<sup>71</sup> One thing is for certain, however. Shostakovich, like the city on the Neva, became Stalin's paradox.

As the man that created Stalin's soundtrack, Stalin alternated between praise and a personal dislike of Shostakovich. As a result, he emerged as both a victim and an instrument of the Soviet propaganda machine. Shostakovich became aware that he needed to operate within the socio-political confines of socialist realism. At the same time, he needed to maintain the artistic creativity that led him to be so adored by the masses. Consequently, his status and international popularity transcended politics. While the impetus to create moves well beyond political boundaries, socialist realism proved an overwhelming political force compelling Shostakovich to adhere to the socio-cultural framework of the time, culminating in his Fifth Symphony. Following such, he scored his Symphony No. 7 as a tribute to all those in Leningrad who suffered under the forces of evil. Whether the evil in question could be attributed to Stalin or Hitler remains contested to this day. In his memoirs, Shostakovich laments that he felt “eternal

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<sup>69</sup> Farrell, “The Siege of Leningrad: Shostakovich and the airbrushing of history,” *People's World*, June 26, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Notes* 50, no. 2 (1993): 760.

<sup>71</sup> Anderson, *Symphony for the City of the Dead*, 198.



pain for those who were killed by Hitler, but [he] feel no less pain for those killed on Stalin's orders. [He] suffer[s] for everyone who was tortured, shot, or starved to death.”<sup>72</sup> Exemplified in his Symphony No. 7, the war liberated Shostakovich’s artistic integrity from the chains of Stalinist realism. He believed that the war liberated him from the yoke of the malleable doctrine of socialist realism, proclaiming that the war provided unprecedented freedom of artistic expression in the Soviet Union. He stated that: “You could finally talk to people. It was still hard, but you could breathe. That’s why I consider the war years productive for the arts. This wasn’t the situation everywhere and in other countries war probably interferes with the arts. But in Russia – for tragic reasons – there was a flowering of the arts.”<sup>73</sup>

#### *About the author*

Muhanna Al Lawati is a recent University of Toronto graduate currently pursuing a master’s at the Geneva Graduate Institute. His research focuses on the history of Anglo-American foreign policy competition in the Persian Gulf and its impact on the formation of the Persian Gulf monarchies. He currently works for the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the UNOG in Geneva. In his spare time, Muhanna enjoys ranking Quentin Tarantino films, reading, and boxing.

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<sup>72</sup> Shostakovich and Volkov, *Testimony*, 155. The authenticity of *Testimony* has repeatedly been a subject of contention. Laurel E. Fay, who has written an extensive biography detailing the composer's life, writes in her review of the memoirs that ‘six prominent Soviet composers, all former students and friends of Shostakovich, declared that Solomon Volkov is the actual author if the book.’ In light of such information, I have decided to largely avoid using *Testimony* where possible. For example, see Laurel E. Fay, Review of *Shostakovich Versus Volkov: Whose Testimony?* by Solomon Volkov, Antonina W. Bouis, and Dmitri Shostakovich. *The Russian Review* 39, no. 4 (1980): 484–93.

<sup>73</sup> Shostakovich and Volkov, *Testimony*, 82.

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