

To what extent does the life and works of Dimitri Shostakovich suggest that he was a critic rather than a stooge of the Stalinist regime?



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Identification and evaluation of sources:

This investigation will explore the following question: To what extent does the life and work of Dimitri Shostakovich suggest that he was a critic rather than a stooge of the Stalinist regime? I have selected a letter¹ Shostakovich wrote to Isaak Glikman from Moscow, during the deadly siege of 1943, which significantly highlights Dimitri's use of irony to criticize Stalin's regime. My second source is the documentary '*The war Symphonies: Shostakovich against Stalin*'², directed by Larry Weinstein, which focuses on Shostakovich's career between 1936 and 1945. The film was released in 1997 at the height of the so-called 'Shostakovich debate'³ regarding interpretations of the composer's life, and strongly illustrates the viewpoint that Shostakovich was a dissident.

The Glikman letter it written by Shostakovich to a close friend during a period of purges, in which Stalin would exile or execute anyone expressing negative thoughts about his regime. This source is valuable because it gives us intimate insight on Shostakovich's sentiments at his period. Using sarcasm, Shostakovich subtly expresses his cynicism towards the government, mocking Stalin and pointing out the irony of the propaganda. He speaks of 1944 in hyperbole: "It will be a year of happiness, of joy, of victory, a year that will bring us all much joy." He continues with "The freedom-loving peoples will at last throw off the yoke of Hitlerism ...and we shall live once more under the sun of Stalin's Constitution," phrases that parrot the propaganda of the time. Glikman states that Shostakovich "rarely spoke an unironic word" and adds that his letters often "parody the journalism of the period"⁴ The main limitation of this source is that its content is open to interpretation: its meaning is implied, not explicitly stated. Furthermore, these letters were only published by Glikman in 2001, so they could have been edited in order to show his friend in a positive light.

The film is valuable for its broad overview of the revisionist perspective. Based on a kaleidoscope of accounts by Dimitri's relatives, friends and colleagues, as documented in *Shostakovich: A life Remembered* by Elizabeth Wilson⁶, the film provides important contextual background. It describes the conditions in which Dimitri grew up, justifying why he had reason to despise the regime. Friends and relatives were sent off to labour camps, including his grandmother He was under constant threat; and nearly executed once. The interpretation of his symphonies and his morals is one of defiance: he was the "voice of his country,"⁷ The purpose of this source is that it was made to present Shostakovich as a hero of the people who opposed the Stalinist system. Therefore its limitations are that it is strongly representative of the revisionist view only: All but one of those interviewed were friends or colleagues of Shostakovich, and most of them were of oppressed by the Stalinist regime, so there is potential for bias. In addition, there is little discussion of why Shostakovich was depicted as a loyal communist up until the 1970s.

¹ Introduction and commentary by Martin Kettle, Last accessed 12th July 2016. *Extracts from Shostakovich's letters*, Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/26/arts.artsfeatures>

² Larry Weinstein, Last accessed 12th July 2016. *The War Symphonies: Shostakovich against Stalin*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fSOJzGJnM>

³ Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Last accessed 12th July 2016. *The Shostakovich Debate*, Available at: <http://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/deb/begin.html>

⁴ Dimitri Shostakovich & Isaak Glikman, Last accessed 12th July 2016. *Story of a Friendship: The letters of Dimitri Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman, 1941-1975*, Available at:

<https://www.amazon.fr/Story-Friendship-Letters-Shostakovich-1941-1975/dp/0801439795>

⁶ Elizabeth Wilson, Last accessed 12th July 2016. *A Life Remembered*, Available at: <http://www.https://books.google.fr/books>

⁷ Valery Gergiev, conductor, Last accessed 13th July 2016. *The War Symphonies: Shostakovich against Stalin*, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fSOJzGJnM>

Investigation

The renowned composer Dimitri Shostakovich was just 23 when Josef Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union, and his works span the period of this brutal dictator; but was he a puppet of the regime or was he a critic? Historically it was assumed that Shostakovich was loyal to the government, (he has joined the communist party in 1960, and often worked directly for the regime) but in 1979, Solomon Volkov, a friend of the artist, published '*Testimony*',⁹ a book presented as Shostakovich's memoirs, which argued that he was a dissident and revealed the hidden meanings in several of his works. Many historians supported this new viewpoint (Ian MacDonald¹⁰, Elizabeth Wilson¹¹, Allan B. Ho and Dmitry Feofanov¹². They released additional material that put his life and works into context and recognized his bravery. This sparked controversy among a group of 'anti-revisionists' led by Laurel Fay, who released an essay¹³ and a book '*Shostakovich: A life*'¹⁴ which slammed *Testimony*. Another anti-revisionist, Richard Taruskin, proposed that Shostakovich purposely rewrote his own image to show himself in a better light, and that the "revisionists" were vainly trying to find meaning in retrospect. This essay will investigate both sides of the so-called 'Shostakovich Debate' in examining Shostakovich's life and his musical output.

Shostakovich first came into conflict with the Stalinist system after the production of his opera, *Lady MacBeth*. Stalin disapproved of the subject matter: the justified murder of a tyrant; and actually walked out of the theatre after the second act. The following day, *Pravda*, published a devastating editorial, accusing Shostakovich of writing "formalistic music"¹⁵, that was "against the people" and concluded that "all of this could end very badly". A committee for artistic affairs was established the same day and the opera was banned, marking the beginning of artistic censorship. After the article, many were afraid to be associated with him, others betrayed him and his income dropped to a fifth of what he had previously earned. He had strong reasons to be critical of the regime, yet could not publicly defend himself at a time when people were being arrested for being 'part of a Trotsky conspiracy'. In analyzing his weak response to the article, anti-revisionist Laurel Fay concludes that he was muddled and changeable, always contradicting himself¹⁶. In contrast, Ian MacDonald explains: he was "Gauging what he could get away with saying and what he would need to pay to Caesar in order to be allowed to continue living the following day"¹⁷. Shostakovich was walking a fine line between survival and resistance; he would not adapt his music to suit the regime. He said to his friend Levon Atovmyan, "I don't write for the newspaper *Pravda*, but for

⁹ Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dimitri Shostakovich* (Available at: <http://www.books.google.co.uk/books>, Last accessed 9th September 2016)

¹⁰ Ian MacDonald, A, Last accessed 26th September 2016. *The New Shostakovich*, Available at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books>

¹¹ Elizabeth Wilson, Last accessed 26th September 2016. *A Life Remembered* p328. Available at: <http://www.books.google.fr/books>

¹² Allan B. Ho and Dmitry Feofanov, A, Last accessed 26th September 2016. *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, Available at: <https://books.google.fr/books>

¹³ Laurel Fay, A, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Russian Review: Shostakovich Versus Volkov: Whose Testimony?*, Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/128813>

¹⁴ Laurel Fay, Last accessed 16th July 2016. *Shostakovich: A Life*, Available at: <http://www.books.google.fr/books>

¹⁵ Pravda, Last accessed 16th July 2016. *Muddle instead of music*, Available at: <http://www.arnoldschalks.nl/tlte1sub1.html>

¹⁶ Laurel Fay, Last accessed 16th July 2016. *Shostakovich: A Life*, Available at: <http://www.books.google.fr/books>

¹⁷ Edwardsville, S, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Laurel E. Fay's Shostakovich: A Life; A review by Ian MacDonald, part 3 1932-48*, Available at: <http://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/fay/fayrev3.html>

myself. I basically don't think about who will say what about my work, but write about what moves me, what has sprouted in my soul and mind."¹⁸

Further analysis of Shostakovich's work supports the revisionist viewpoint that he had an impressive capacity to secretly criticize the government. His fifth symphony (1937), is a prime example, a subtle satire of the forced optimism imposed by the communist regime on the suffering population. When presenting it, Shostakovich cleverly disguised the dark sarcasm of the final movement by emphasizing the joyous and optimistic tenor. Musicologist, Inna Barsova, states that Shostakovich would "defend the truth of the music with untruthful words about it"¹⁹. In contrast, anti-revisionist, Laurel Fay, cites an article by Alexey Tolstoy, who describes how "Our audience responds enthusiastically to all that is bright, clear, joyous, optimistic, life-affirming"²⁰. However, Tolstoy was enlisted to write the article for Soviet propaganda and most of its content was a 'rehash of ready-made socialist-realist clichés'²¹. Shostakovich concurs with Tolstoy describing his symphony as a 'creative response' to Pravda. He saw this as an opportunity to disassociate his symphony from any hint of pessimism in order to stay in line with soviet demands. Anti-revisionist, Richard Taruskin, describes the symphony as a "foreordained triumph"²² but Alexander Fadeyev who was present at the premiere, reveals Shostakovich's true intent: "The end does not sound like an outcome (and ever less like a triumph or victory), but like a punishment or revenge of someone"²³.

Another example of Shostakovich's 'covert' criticism is the Seventh symphony (1941), written about the Nazi invasion, but equally referring to the Stalinist system. Maxime Shostakovich, Dimitri's son, notes that "critics felt it described the tragedy of the war; but it was *not* just about the war.... the time *preceding* the war was probably the inspiration ... "²⁴. In fact, a sketch of the "invasion theme" is dated 26 June 1939²⁵. Furthermore, the tune of the notorious march in the first movement was conceived by Shostakovich as the "Stalin" theme (all who were close to the composer knew this)²⁷. However, Laurel Fay interprets the piece as a simple war symphony and Richard Taruskin states that Shostakovich "insisted on keeping latent content latent — and seeing it labile."²⁸ The 7th symphony was performed in the Philharmonic during the deadly siege and became a symbol of resistance, broadcast worldwide. Stalin wanted the symphony to become 'his own' and Shostakovich was now forced to be Stalin's mouthpiece. He signed articles without

¹⁸ Laurel Fay, Last accessed 16th July 2016. *Shostakovich: A Life*, p 306 , Available at: <http://www.https://books.google.fr/books>

¹⁹ Edwardsville, S, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. 'Dissident' meanings in Shostakovich's music by Allan Ho , Available at: <http://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/deb/dw.html>

²⁰ David Fanning, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Shostakovich Studies*, p 33 Available at: <http://www.https://books.google.fr/books>

²¹ David Fanning, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Shostakovich Studies*, p 33 Available at: <http://www.https://books.google.fr/books>

²² Edwardsville, S, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Laurel E. Fay's Shostakovich: A Life; A review by Ian MacDonald, part 3 1932-48*, Available at: <http://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/fay/fayrev3.html>

²³ Solomon Volkov, Last Accessed 26th September 2016. *St. Petersburg: A cultural History*, p. 425 Available at: <http://https://www.amazon.com/>

²⁴ Six Lectures on the Shostakovich Symphonies, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Shostakovich Reconsidered* p 410-411, Available at: <http://https://www.amazon.com/Shostakovich-Reconsidered-Allan-B-Ho/dp/0907689574>

²⁵ Allan Ho , Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, pp. 157-58, Available at: <http://https://www.amazon.com/Shostakovich-Reconsidered-Allan-B-Ho/dp/0907689574>

²⁷ Edwardsville, S, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. Code, Quotation, and Collage: Some Musical Allusions in the Works of Dmitry Shostakovich", *Shostakovich Reconsidered*, p. 482., Available at: <http://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/altfan/altfan3.html>

²⁸ Holdings, G, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *The Flummery Digest*, Available at: <http://flum.blogspot.fr/1995/04/richard-taruskin-in-atlantic-monthly.html>

reading them and delivered speeches written by functionaries. Elizabeth Wilson confirms that “It was a secret to no one that these were written by professional journalists, and only signed by the supposed author.. an everyday technique employed for "speeches by famous people”³⁰. Laurel Fay states “While it would be foolish to accept at face value all the statements and writings ascribed to Shostakovich, it does not follow that he shared none of the sentiments or opinions expressed in this way”³¹ although she provides no evidence to support this claim.

Shostakovich is most forthright in mocking the regime with his Ninth symphony, written as an ode to Stalin’s victory against Hitler in 1945. Shostakovich had originally written a heroic version, but he abandoned it for a light tune, deliberately being defiant, to deflate Stalin’s ego. Many Communist zealots and ideologues said: "What, is he making fun of our victory? This kind of melody. A kind of street whistling. Too light, I would say, for a symphony.” Shostakovich did [in this work] what is called giving “the finger” in the pocket”³². After this symphony Shostakovich’s music was banned, he was fired from his job at the conservatory and he was called to Moscow to publicly denounce his ‘crimes’. For the remaining time under Stalin, Dimitri wrote music for Stalin’s films that glorified the Soviet Union. Anti-revisionists use this as proof that he was a ‘loyal’ communist, but fail to take into account the context.

A thorough analysis of Shostakovich’s life and works indicates that he was a strong critic of Stalin’s government. The revisionists present convincing arguments to support this conclusion, detailing how he was directly affected by Stalin’s policies of oppression and censorship with the *Lady Macbeth* opera, and explaining how the irony and satirical punch of his writings and his music were deftly disguised assaults on the regime seen in his Fifth and Ninth symphony or in his letter to Gilkman. In contrast, the anti-revisionists simply criticize the revisionists without presenting clear evidence that Shostakovich was loyal to the regime. Laurel Fay, in particular, does not analyse her findings in-depth, totally misses the nuance and irony of Shostakovich’s work, and completely ignores the context in which Shostakovich composed these symphonies: During the time of Stalin’s reign, any negative word against the regime could lead directly to the labour camps or execution. Shostakovich was a well-disguised dissident, while producing extraordinary music that was considered ‘acceptable’ by the regime, and he was clever enough to get away with it for many years.

Reflection

My investigation highlighted the limitations of sources in relation to their purpose; material prepared with a specific aim has the potential for bias. For example, *Testimony* is a collection of primary sources (including letters and memoirs) written by a friend of Shostakovich, Solomon Volkev; its purpose was to persuade the reader that Shostakovich was a dissident, so all of the material supports this viewpoint. Similarly, Laurel Fay’s book was written to discredit *Testimony* and promote the ‘anti-revisionist’ view, so she interprets the material to fit her opinions: she leaves out facts, misinterprets statements and uses sources out of context. For example, when Shostakovich was giving speeches for Stalin, she failed to acknowledge that this was a well-known propaganda technique and it is unlikely that he believed in the words he was made to read out.

The investigation also raised issues about the reliability of methods used: many of the sources relied on interviews and analysis of Shostakovich’s music. Historians must acknowledge the

³⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, Last accessed 12th July 2016. *A Life Remembered* p328. Available at: [http://www. https://books.google.fr/books](http://www.https://books.google.fr/books)

³¹ Laurel Fay, A, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *Shostakovich: A Life* p173, Available at: <http://www.https://books.google.fr/books>

³² Larry Weinstein, Last accessed 23rd July 2016. *The War Symphonies: Shostakovich against Stalin*, Available at: <http://https://www.youtube.com/watch>

inherent problems with interviews and direct quotes; peoples' memories are not always reliable and they are often biased, if only subconsciously. I tackled this issue by consulting a wide variety of sources and looked at factual information to assure myself that a quote was valid. The issue of understanding the meanings behind Shostakovich's symphonies was difficult because it is based on personal interpretation. Again, I looked at several different analyses and also gathered information about the events in Dimitri's life at the time of writing the symphonies to put things into context and look at them logically. This underlined the importance of context to me; you cannot draw conclusions without first understanding the background situation of the events.

Finally, the most challenging part of this investigations was that Shostakovich himself was such a complex character: he used satire and irony and never explicitly stated that he was a dissident or a loyal communist. This made it more difficult to figure out his political views. While the debate around Shostakovich was very polarized, I came to accept the revisionist viewpoint more readily than the anti-revisionist because they built a stronger case with a wider variety of sources and more informative documents (Elizabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A life remembered* and Allan Ho's *Shostakovich reconsidered*). In addition, analysing his music was what made this investigation both interesting and burdensome as it was open to interpretation; however I have reached the conclusion that music is valuable as it gives personal insight on the artist's thoughts and adds contextual information.

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