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Westerners might have been accustomed to seeing war-related images on the cover of newspapers by the time they received the newest edition of *Time* magazine the morning of July 20, 1942. And indeed, that is what they got. But instead of the expected picture of a soldier or political leader, or even an ill-spirited caricature of the enemy, readers were graced with a representative from a different front of the war: the musical front. That day, *Time* venerably presented the American people with "Fireman Shostakovich," the internationally renowned Soviet composer who famously joined the Leningrad fire department shortly before an evacuation sent him elsewhere when the Nazis sieged his city. In 1942, Dmitri Shostakovich was held in high esteem not only by *Time* magazine, but also by the Soviet Union government and the whole music world. However, just five years prior in 1937, Shostakovich, under fire from the Communist Party, feared a different kind of evacuation from Leningrad, one that would march him to his death by execution or in gulag. Such abrupt and substantial changes in status were commonplace for composers like Shostakovich during dictator Joseph Stalin's rule over the Soviet Union. This paper explores such changes, along with the ambiguity, fear, and political considerations that defined the Soviet musical world throughout Stalin's reign from the 1920s until his death in 1953.

Despite the well-known hardships the music world would endure under Joseph Stalin's rule over the Soviet Union, the 1920s was conversely an era of "relative tolerance and absence of

direct Party interference in cultural affairs."[1] Though it was preferred for art to be inspired by the recent Russian Revolution which toppled the tsardom and brought the communists into power, the government "recognized the need for creative freedom and individuality of expression" as to ensure the perpetuity of the musical profession.[2] In fact, music was often seen as apolitical during this time, and modernist styles were actually supported by the first leaders of the Soviet musical world and government alike. Composers of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM) and the Association of Contemporary Music (ACM), the latter of which supported Shostakovich in his early career and promoted avant-garde works, were often staunch communists who dedicated much of their music to pro-Revolutionary ideas and functions.[3] Soon, however, the RAPM would begin accusing the ACM of "propagating 'decadent,' 'bourgeois,' [and] 'formalist ideology'" in their music.[4] By the end of the decade, the Communist Party adopted to the RAPM's viewpoint and began considering policies that controlled the arts more tightly to stymie the increase in popularity for the avant-garde. In fact, much of the vague terminology characteristic of Party denunciations in the 1930s and 1940s were borrowed from the RAPM's statements criticizing the ACM in the 1920s.

On April 23, 1932, the Central Committee of the Communist Party released the resolution "On the Reformation of Literary and Artistic Organizations," which "banned all existing societies of professional artists" and replaced them with state-sponsored "creative

[1] Kevin V. Mulcahy, "Official Culture and Cultural Repression: The Case of Dmitri Shostakovich," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18, no. 3 (1984): 72, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3332676?origin=crossref.
[2] Anna Ferenc, "Music in the socialist state," in *Soviet Music and Society under Lenin and Stalin: The Baton and Sickle*, Neil Edmunds (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004): 9, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/providence/detail.action?docID=182498.
[3] Ibid., 11-12. It is important to consider here that most composers who were not supportive of the Bolsheviks fled Russia around the Revolution. Those who remained likely supported the radical changes the communists brought.
[4] Ibid., 12.

unions," one for each artistic field.[5] From this declaration emerged the Composers' Union, which in 1939 would be renamed the All-USSR Organizational Committee of the Union of Soviet Composers.[6] It was through this organization that the Central Committee enacted its controls on the Soviet music world until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.[7] In fear, the most modernist artists disbanded and lost influence in the country's musical activities. The new aim of music under centralized control, coordinated within the Composers' Union by prominent figures like Shostakovich and Aram Khachaturian, was "to oppose 'the ideology of modernists…' and to promote 'the development of a Marxist-Leninist musicology.'"[8] However, it would take a few years for the Party to take any major action to enforce—and expand upon—these new rules.

By the end of the 1930s, the main tenets of socialist realism, the 'official' style of Soviet art the government had set, had been communicated to Soviet artistic communities. Since the Resolution of 1932, the Party had espoused a doctrine that art should be committed to the "portrayal of an idealistic reality in its 'revolutionary development.'"[9] Indeed, for a decade Stalin had been promoting the idea that Soviet music should be considered "revolutionary art" that "[has] the honor of shaping and organizing the psychology of the generations to come."[10] Thus, it is clear from the start of his reign that music was expected to have an ideological purpose. Though the vast sea of scholarly material that touches upon this subject provides helpful information explaining the government's enforcement of socialist realism, it has never been clear even to scholars, let alone composers, exactly how one was supposed to write in the style of

[5] Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939-1953* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 18.
[6] For clarity, I will call the AUOCUSC as the Composers' Union throughout this paper, as they were basically the same thing.
[7] Ibid., 13, 21.
[8] Ferenc, "Music in the socialist state," 13.
[9] Ibid., 12-13.
[10] Mulcahy, "Official Culture," 72.

socialist realism. According to Russian cellist and musicologist Alexander Ivashkin, this vague style "is a very complex combination of varying components, including Old Russian traditions and superstitions, allusions to classical and Romantic music, and the specifics of the Soviet general and musical education system," though these precepts were also subject to seemingly random changes.[11] The members of the Composers' Union would learn this not by official decree or instruction, but through the fearful endurance of Party denunciations. The first and probably most famous of such denunciations was directed towards Dmitri Shostakovich in 1936 over his 1934 opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. Though praised by music critics and the public, the state-run newspaper *Pravda*, in an article titled "Muddle instead of Music" published two days after Stalin himself walked out midway through a performance of it, claimed it displayed aspects of "formalism," attacked its "absence of melody," and decried the "pessimistic and immoral story" it apparently told.[12] Above the rest, though, it declared composers must stay away from dissonance and "other degenerate modernist elements" in their music, consequently forcing Shostakovich to withdraw his experimental Fourth Symphony from its scheduled premiere.[13] The Soviet musical world was shocked at this denunciation, as Shostakovich had been a favorite of the Party for years and had even been an active supporter of the Revolution in 1917. Even so, the rest of the composers, nervous about the government's next target, joined in chastising and "browbeating" Comrade Shostakovich in meetings organized to discuss the matter.[14] As expected, however, they would soon have to double down on their compositional practices too, for in 1937, the Great Terror (also called the Great Purge) had

[11] Alexander Ivashkin, "Who's Afraid of Socialist Realism?" *The Slavonic and East European Review* 92, no. 3 (2014): 430, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.92.3.0430.
[12] Mulcahy, "Official Culture," 73.
[13] Ferenc, "Music in the socialist state," 14.
[14] Tomoff, *Creative Union*, 22.

begun. During this period, many artists mysteriously vanished, having been executed or sent away to prison or gulag for their ideological crimes, never be seen or heard from again.[15]

Though this threat was very much a reality in the late 1930s, the Soviet Union actually gained a prominent composer in 1936 with the return of Sergei Prokofiev from a fifteen-year hiatus in the West. The government, attempting to "shore up its cultural standing," promised the homesick Prokofiev celebrity status if he came back to his native Russia to compose Party-conscious music. The truly communist composer could not find a reason to turn down this offer to enhance his already glowing reputation.[16] Inspired by visions of a "musical Revolution,"[17] Prokofiev accepted a commission to write a piece for the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution of 1917, determined to accomplish a decade-old mission to set political texts by Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin to choral music. In an article published the same day as the *Pravda* denunciation of Shostakovich, Prokofiev excitedly declared "Lenin's words will serve for the first time as the basis for a large-scale musical composition" and in the same breath commended the revolutionary's "pictorial, clear-cut, and persuasive language."[18] Despite his overwhelmingly good intentions, Prokofiev's *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October* was apparently guilty of enough (mostly unspecified) violations of socialist realism that the Chairman of the Committee of Artistic Affairs, Platon Kerzhentsev, "ensured that it went unperformed" and never gave Prokofiev the money promised to him upon its commission.[19]

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[15] Ibid., 23. Most of these composers who vanished were usually not very well-known or popular, as the Party could not afford to lose the bulk of its cultural talent.

[16] Simon Morrison and Nelly Kravetz, "The *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October*, or How the Specter of Communism Haunted Prokofiev," *The Journal of Musicology* 23, no. 2 (2006): 227, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jm.2006.23.2.227.

[17] Ibid., 228. The authors capitalize "Revolution" here to describe it as the musical version of the political revolution that occurred in 1917.

[18] Ibid., 232.

[19] Ibid., 248-250. The primary accusation against it was that the direct quotation of prominent leaders' speeches and writings for music was "unjustifiable." Anything more than that is unclear, though it was common practice for composers to take from prettified poems about Marx and Lenin instead. Furthermore, the Party declared that

Having found success with other equally patriotic works approved by the Party, Prokofiev "found himself in [a] paradoxical situation" common for many composers at the time. He was capable of "trusting 'neither the inner rules that governed [his] own creative imagination, nor the outer rules that governed the society of which [he was] a part.'" He would later describe this plainly as a "state of terror."[20] However, Prokofiev, along with other composers, at least learned to adapt to the Party's rules. He began making his music "deliberately simple [and] simplistic," while Shostakovich and others drew from classical and Romantic styles so their music was more understandable to the generally musically uneducated Party and Soviet public.[21]

Luckily, once World War II began in 1939, the Party, for logistical and practical reasons, relaxed their "artistic ideological constraints."[22] By this point, everyone in the Soviet Union was expected first and foremost to contribute to the war effort. For musicians, this often meant joining army bands and writing war songs to help energize and entertain the troops. Some even became soldiers themselves. Either way, the government backtracked on its repressive policies and instead began propping musicians and composers up and exempting them from military service in the interest of their "future potential" in morale maintenance.[23] Furthermore, the government began hosting competitions in which composers would write war songs for a 100,000-ruble prize. From one such competition came the national anthem of the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia.[24] Suddenly "socially valuable," composers furiously increased their output, especially in popular songs that were memorable and positive to the Soviet people. Wartime relaxation occurred even in the more serious classical settings. Shostakovich's Seventh

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"current leaders were off-limits… on stage and screen," a policy assumingly extended to the concert hall and thus banning any mention of Stalin.
[20] Ibid., 250-251.
[21] Ivashkin, "Who's Afraid of Socialist Realism?" 436.
[22] Ference, "Music in the socialist state," 15.
[23] Tomoff, *Creative Union*, 74-77.
[24] Ibid., 83.

Symphony (1942) was instantly celebrated as a "powerful symbol of the heroic defiance of the Soviet population in the face of the Nazi invasion,"[25, 26] and Prokofiev received the Stalin Prize in 1942 for his warlike Seventh Piano Sonata, the "Stalingrad."[27] Distracted by military matters, the Soviet government afforded little time to denounce even the next two symphonies Shostakovich daringly published, as they were decidedly negative in mood and unclear in their depictions of the war. Either way, the government was happy merely to have a "homegrown example of artistic accomplishment"[28] to "counter the Nazi claim that Soviet… culture was subhuman and worthy only of complete eradication."[29]

After the war ended, the Soviet government continued to support the composition of popular patriotic songs that glorified the Revolution, Soviet life, or, especially, their victory in World War II. In addition, the Party began "renewing the ideological discipline" of its members and organizations after the relaxation period of the early decade.[30] The Composers' Union in 1946 commented on how new compositions failed to "reflect the most important themes of the postwar lives of the Soviet people" and even began expelling some of its "unqualified" members.[31] This set up new attacks from the Central Committee over "formalist" and "bourgeois" elements in Soviet music in what became known as the *Zhdanovshchina* of 1946-1948, named after Minister of Culture Andrei Zhdanov.[32] Denunciations during this period usually went against works that were non-programmatic and involved no singing, probably

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[25] Ibid., 86.
[26] Symphony No. 7, *Leningrad*. Dissonances prevail but the mood is clearly positive/determined and the theme warlike.
[27] George G. Weickhardt, "Dictatorship and Music: How Russian Music Survived the Soviet Regime," *Russian History* 31, no. 1/2 (2004): 130, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24657738.
[28] Tomoff, *Creative Union*, 87-88.
[29] Ibid., 78.
[30] Ibid., 95.
[31] Ibid., 102-104.
[32] Mulcahy, "Official Culture," 74.

because without words the musical message is less clear. Nevertheless, the accusations were all too familiar to Soviet composers. They all exhibited "formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies… alien to the Soviet people and its artistic taste."[33] Considering the events of the Great Terror a decade before, fearful composers "could not know whether such public attacks [in the *Zhdanovshchina*] were the prelude to arrest and execution."[34] The enforcement, though often carrying with it threats to job security, proved to be rather clumsy instead. *Zhdanovshchina* accusations more often than not were framed as calls to action for the Composers' Union. More notably, they displayed the Central Committee's total lack of the musical wherewithal necessary to articulate what they found wrong with the music they denounced, a point Zhdanov expressly admitted in 1948.[35] The context of this confession was perhaps the most noteworthy event of the *Zhdanovshchina*: the denunciation of Vano Muradeli's 1947 opera *The Great Friendship*.

It must have been truly mindboggling to Vano Muradeli that this particular opera was somehow 'formalist,' whatever that meant, as it was dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of the Revolution and was a "tribute to [the establishment of communism in] Stalin's native Georgia."[36] In studying the *Zhdanovshchina*, musicologist Kevin V. Mulcahy adds to the growing definitions of the terms of socialist realism. According to him, this continued brand of official state art emphasized exiled revolutionary Leon Trotsky's remark that art should be a "representation of class interests and a vehicle for class domination." In essence, art in a material communist society was meant to optimistically reflect workers' interests.[37] Somehow, Muradeli's opera, despite utilizing the sung voice, did not achieve this. The big crime, however, was probably his

[33] Ferenc, "Music in the socialist state," 16.
[34] Weickhardt, "Dictatorship and Music," 131.
[35] Tomoff, *Creative Union*, 134.
[36] Ferenc, "Music in the socialist state," 16.
[37] Mulcahy, "Official Culture," 75.

unrestrained use of 'modernist' dissonances.[38] In response, the Central Committee on February 10, 1948, issued a resolution calling for the "development of Soviet music in a realistic direction."[39] What this meant how it was to be done was, as per usual, unclear, but leaders of the Composers' Union responded by resolving to include more Russian classical and folk music in their newer compositions and also partook in self-criticism meetings just for good measure.[40]

The *Zhdanovshchina* ended with the sudden death of Andrei Zhdanov in the summer of 1948, but the music world's struggles with the Soviet government would continue until Stalin's death five years later. This final period of the Soviet repression of music is typified by the birth of a new term for denunciation purposes: cosmopolitanism. Though never directly admitted, cosmopolitanism was associated with Stalin's sudden postwar paranoia over the Soviet Union's Jewish population,[41] evident in the fact that the majority of the victims during this wave were Jewish.[42] The Party, however, construed the meaning of cosmopolitanism to involve the "[praise of] unhealthy foreign influences and [the ignorance of] Russian preeminence in any artistic sphere."[43] This was related to the idea that Jews could not be Russian, a sentiment that gained traction during postwar Russification efforts which descended from the patriotic policies of World War II.[44] Those who hoped to be anti-cosmopolitan were to "[reject] Western-style popular music and its characteristic focus on images of sex and violence that seemed to appeal to young audiences the world over."[45] This was a direct jab at jazz, which to the Soviets was associated with dance music "imitative" of non-Russian cultures[46] that had started to gain

[38] Especially noticeable in the Dance of the Youth.
[39] Tomoff, *Creative Union*, 141.
[40] Ibid., 142-146.
[41] Ibid., 154.
[42] Ibid., 157.
[43] Ibid., 154.
[44] Ibid., 157. The Soviets then (and Russians today) called World War II the "Great Patriotic War."
[45] Ibid., 157-158.
[46] Ibid., 159.

popularity outside of the United States. Concerned that younger generations had not been adequately educated about 19th Century Russian composers like Mikhail Glinka and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the government removed music historians from their positions for being too praiseful of modern "abstract and formally complicated" music in their writings and submitting to "Western notions of progressive art rather than developing native Soviet ideals of realism.[47] Anxious over the demographics of the conservatories, the Party even instructed the members of the Composers' Union, many of whom worked for the conservatories, to increase the admissions of Russian students and to decrease those of Jewish students.[48] The Composers' Union often ignored these requests, however, because they recognized the unequalled contributions Jewish musicians made in the field of music education, and enforcement from the government was often weak anyway.[49]

This period of repression would not end until Stalin died on March 5, 1953.[50] With this came the sudden end of tight cultural controls. Though his successor Nikita Khrushchev would halfheartedly resurrect some socialist realist dictates, the 1950s in the Soviet Union was known as the Thaw and saw the relaxation of cultural and economic pressure as well as a condemnation of the personality cult that surrounded Stalin for much of his reign.[51] Many composers were thereafter restored to prestige and, though scarred, would enjoy relative freedom in their musical pursuits for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps it is justice that Fireman Shostakovich's legacy would be furnished in the *Time* magazine cover that celebrated him and his profession on July 20, 1942. Indeed, historians and

[47] Ibid., 156.
[48] Ibid., 167-168.
[49] Ibid., 210.
[50] This, interestingly, was the same day as the death of Sergei Prokofiev.
[51] Ferenc, "Music in the socialist state," 16.

musicologists delightfully remember Shostakovich for the bravery and resilience he displayed in the face of harsh government repression and criticism. Listeners, too, are graced now by his musical contributions as much as the Soviet people were when they were first performed. Fireman Shostakovich not only tells the story of a political and ideological battle over the world of music, but also of the often-overlooked importance of music in any society, whether authoritarian or free. Surely those who enjoy freedom of expression now should appreciate those who fought for it, even if nonviolently, in times and places often forgotten by the present. But the story of Fireman Shostakovich, along with his composing comrades, has a moral too: music always wins. It can carry one through immense difficulty. It can fight wars and oppression. It can put out fires. Most importantly, it lasts forever while the bad things in life always die.

2798 words.

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