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ABSTRACT

In the wake of World War II, Joseph Stalin began a period of increased political and cultural repression in the Soviet Union, and as a result, an unprecedented number of musical compositions were banned because they did not comply with the Soviet vision for music. The censorship affected many, including Dmitri Shostakovich, arguably the most famous Soviet composer. While he was never a blatant dissident, Shostakovich was able to create a reflective, enduring history of both his own artistic difficulties and a moral commentary on the broader oppression of Stalin's rule. He accomplished this by reusing musical themes from his banned works and by embracing Jewish folk themes. Through self-quotation, Shostakovich created a lasting history of his work that defied the censor's pen and affirmed the lasting power of artistic expression. Shostakovich also responded to the authoritarian cultural program by incorporating Jewish idioms into several new works, including his song cycle, *From Jewish Folk Poetry*. Since Jews experienced intense official pressure throughout the Soviet era, his sympathy for their culture was courageous and exceptional.

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Remembering Laughter and Tears in a Drawer Music as a Response to Soviet Repression

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*Music*¹

It shines with a miraculous light
Revealing to the eye the cutting of facets.
It alone speaks to me
When others are too scared to come near
When the last friend has turned his back
It was with me in my grave
As if a thunderstorm sang
Or all the flowers spoke.²

Anna Akhmatova, dedicated to Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich

In 1936, Joseph Stalin and Andrei Zhdanov³ attended a performance of *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, the most recent opera by Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich. The opera marked the high point of Shostakovich's rise to fame as the Soviet Union's most talented young composer. Despite public enthusiasm for the opera, and over 200 wildly successful performances, Stalin and Zhdanov left the performance early. Two days later, an article appeared in *Pravda* entitled "Muddle Instead of Music." This article was a brutal denunciation and condemned the composer as "formalist," "leftist," and virtually anti-Soviet.⁴ Although Andrei Zhdanov played only a minor role in this 1936 denunciation, a decade later, in 1946, he was appointed as the new monitor of culture for the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin and assumed an influential role in guiding Soviet

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² Elizabeth Wilson, 1994. *Shostakovich: a life remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 319.

³ In 1936, Zhdanov was the leader of the All-Union Communist Party in Leningrad.

⁴ See "Shostakovich and the Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk Debacle," in Piero Weiss, *Opera: a history in documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 302-03.

culture. World War II had ended, and Stalin was determined to reassert state control over culture. Thus began *zhdanovshchina*,⁵ an era of unprecedented artistic repression in the Soviet Union. Confronted with a sharp increase in censorship and public ridicule, most composers desperately attempted to satisfy the state's demand for "socialist realism" and to obliterate their "formalist" tendencies even though no one understood exactly what was implied by the two terms.⁶

Shostakovich, the most beloved and well-known composer of the Soviet era, publicly apologized for his formalism and promised to reform his music according to party demands. His work, however, continued to defy government policies and constituted a less submissive, more politically incorrect response. Shostakovich not only quoted many of his officially banned works in new compositions but also increasingly incorporated Jewish folk idioms⁷ even though Jews, along with composers, were suffering from increased scrutiny. Shostakovich created a reflective, outspoken musical history that was a critique of government-imposed restrictions on his own life and in the lives of others.

The Zhdanov Decree, issued on February 10, 1948 following the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Music, brought two years of growing political tension to a boiling point. It condemned "formalism" and demanding "realism", and it left few Soviet composers untouched.⁸ Many of their works were stricken from the

⁵ Zhdanovism. The period of denunciations and strict control over Soviet culture that was led by Andrei Zhdanov and lasted from the late 1940s until Stalin's death in 1953.

⁶ Barbara Makanowitzky, "Music to Serve the State," *Russian Review* 24, no. 3 (1965): 269. Makanowitzky, commenting on what at the time (1965) was still the official Soviet aesthetic, stated that:

The Soviets show no more doubt of the eventual triumph of socialist realism as the universal form of art than of the eventual triumph of communism as the universal form of government. However, there is much less certainty about what socialist realism is. The Soviets themselves have been unable to arrive at a precise concept, and the official pronouncements of Soviet authorities on what is and is not desirable on the part of an artist demonstrate how much easier it is to state a theory than to apply it, particularly to something so abstract as music (269).

⁷ For clarity, I borrow Braun's definition of "idiom" as, "... any kind of national subject, idea, historical reference and musical intonation. Musical intonations will be defined to mean any melodic, rhythmic or harmonic nucleus which projects a certain ethno-social characteristic sound or image". Joachim Braun, *Jews in Soviet music* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Soviet and East European Research Centre, 1977), 1.

⁸ See Alexander Werth, *Musical uproar in Moscow* (London: Turnstile Press, 1949), 48. Zhdanov specifically criticized Shostakovich for his "crude" naturalism, and his displacement of "clear" melodic structure with chaotic vulgarity. Unlike the work of Tchaikovsky and Rimskij-Korsakov, Zhdanov considered Shostakovich's appeal limited to "esthetes and formalists who have lost all healthy tastes" (49).



Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich

Library of Congress

official repertoire, leaving only a token few to be played by performers too terrified to associate themselves with the disgraced, formalist composers. Soviet music was expected to be for “the people” with blatantly popular and socialist themes. Furthermore, composers were required to present optimism about the

future of socialism, not reminders of suffering or grief.⁹ All compositions that did not live up to these demands were to be blotted out from Soviet memory. It was in defiance of this extreme censorship and in an effort to preserve his own history that Shostakovich began quoting his banned compositions.

Shostakovich had already composed controversial work when Zhdanov issued his decree. His monumental opera, *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, was in official disgrace, in part, because it dared to portray adultery, rape, and murder—topics that were not supposed to exist or even be discussed in Soviet society. It was barred from Soviet stages until 1961, but even then, it was only allowed to be performed after significant re-working. Shostakovich's *Eighth Symphony* "fail[ed] to be a grandiose hymn extolling Soviet victory over the Germans" and was promptly withdrawn.¹⁰ The authorities made it clear that Soviet art should inspire confidence and optimism in the masses about the future of socialism, not elicit reflection on social problems or injustice.¹¹ Shostakovich withdrew the symphony "voluntarily" upon suggestion. Throughout his life, Shostakovich suffered repeated censure for failing to incorporate the aims of socialist realism into his music. Thus, the Soviet authorities forced many of Shostakovich's works into "nonexistence" simply because they did not fit the official vision for music. Under such repressive conditions, a person's most precious possession is memory. It was in the spirit of creating a musical autobiography that Shostakovich composed his *Eighth Quartet* in July 1960. The question then becomes: what could have motivated Shostakovich to revisit many of his older, banned works so long after zhdanovshchina?

The catalyst for this quartet was not only the memory of suffering under Stalin but also ongoing political conditions. In June 1960, after decades of heel-dragging, Shostakovich had finally become a member of the Communist Party. Friends and family recall Shostakovich crying bitterly over his new membership, even contemplating suicide.¹² The event was personally devastating and hardly voluntary. There are many theories as to why he finally broke down and joined; the most likely explanation is that he was coerced into membership after Khrushchev appointed him President of the Soviet Composers' Union. Even

⁹ See Wilson, *Shostakovich: a life remembered*, 222; See also Makanowitzky, "Music to Serve the State," 275; See also Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: a life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 160-65.

¹⁰ Wilson, 175.

¹¹ Makanowitzky, 267, 274.

¹² See Michael Ardov, Rosanna Kelly, and Michael Meylac, 2004. *Memories of Shostakovich: interviews with the composer's children* (London: Short, 2004), 159-60; See also Dmitry Shostakovich and Isaak Glickman, *Story of a Friendship: The Letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glickman 1941–1975, With a Commentary by Isaak Glikman* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2001), 91-92.

though Stalin was long dead, the oppressive political climate of the Soviet Union was still intact and still a threatening presence in individual lives.

A month after joining the Communist Party, Shostakovich completed the *Eighth Quartet*. Lev Lebedinsky, a close friend, recalls that “[Shostakovich] dedicated the Quartet to the victims of fascism to disguise his intentions.... In fact he intended it as a summation of everything he had written before. It was his farewell to life. He associated joining the Party with a moral, as well as physical death.”¹³ Scattered throughout the *Eighth Quartet*, there are quotations from many of Shostakovich’s previous works, including the disgraced *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and *Eighth Symphony*. Ironically, Shostakovich also included excerpts from “Tormented by Grievous Bondage,” a popular song from the 1918 Revolution. In a letter to his friend Isaac Glickman, Shostakovich jokingly described the new quartet as “quite a nice little hodge-podge.”¹⁴

What could have motivated Shostakovich to revisit so many of his older, banned works even as the Soviet government continued to exert its power so forcefully? While Lebedinsky sees the *Eighth Quartet* simply as an autobiographical response to party membership, Shostakovich’s daughter, Galina, explains that the dedication “to the victims of fascism” was not the original inscription.

[Father announced,] ‘I’ve just finished writing a composition which I’ve dedicated to my own memory.’ [...] That was the day he completed the famous Eighth Quartet.... Immediately pressure was put on the composer to change the dedication. Father was obliged to concede and the work was dedicated to the victims of fascism.¹⁵

At that time, ‘fascism’ still conjured up poignant memories of the Nazi invasion of Russia during World War II. That dedication alone would have made the work an instant success, but the *Eighth Quartet* became a timeless masterpiece because it addressed more than one destructive regime. The composer’s son, Maxim Shostakovich, suggests that the word ‘fascism’ should be understood as the ‘totalitarianism’ of the Soviet era, especially under Stalin’s rule.¹⁶ From that perspective, Shostakovich could include himself as a victim of fascism in a vague and officially acceptable dedication. Despite the changes in wording, the music itself conveys Shostakovich’s original self-dedication in ways that a title page

¹³ Wilson, 340.

¹⁴ Shostakovich and Glickman, 91.

¹⁵ Ardon, Kelly and Meylac, 158.

¹⁶ Ibid., 158-60.

could never convey. The evocation of Shostakovich's compositional history and the repetition of four notes — D, S, C, and H (Shostakovich's monogram in German note names) — maintain the self-eulogy of an autobiographical composition.

Why did Shostakovich have such an urgent desire to create a record of his life and music? The reason extends well beyond forced party membership. Maxim Shostakovich reminisces, "From the beginning of the 1930s and up to Stalin's death, Shostakovich himself lived under constant threat of arrest and execution."¹⁷ The threat wasn't just confined to Shostakovich; it was firmly entrenched in Soviet society. The composer had witnessed countless, unexplained "disappearances" of fellow citizens who had supposedly committed crimes against the state. Friends and family might privately remember the victims of Stalin's purges, but officially, the dead had never existed. Just as musical works were banned from Soviet repertoire, human lives were swiftly removed from public memory. In a letter to Isaak Glickman, Shostakovich explained, 'I started thinking that if some day I die, nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself. The title page could carry the dedication: 'To the memory of the composer of this quartet'.'¹⁸ Through the quotation of his banned compositions, Shostakovich was able to create a permanent memorial to vanished art and souls.

After 1946, Shostakovich would further incorporate Jewish folk themes, a development that was in response to the post-war political context. After World War II, the crushing censorship of *zhdanovshchina* coincided with a violent effort to eliminate foreign influences from Soviet society. One of the groups that the state found most threatening was the "cosmopolitans"—an abstract, manufactured label for Jews. In January 1948, Solomon Mikhoels (a cornerstone of Yiddish theater and close friend of Shostakovich) died mysteriously. Most authorities agree that he was murdered upon Stalin's orders.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a World War II era institution, was disbanded that year. Following a series of violent interrogations and secret trials, thirteen of its former members were executed in 1952. Meanwhile, the Soviet press began a lengthy and passionate campaign against the threat of "cosmopolitanism".²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 66.

¹⁸ Shostakovich and Glickman, 90-91.

¹⁹ Wilson, 227.

²⁰ A.N. Iakovlev, Anthony Austin, and Paul Hollander, *A century of violence in Soviet Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 200-210.

Finally, Israel became a state, and the mass emigration that followed caused Stalin no end of angst as people rushed to flee the Soviet Union.²¹

While Zhdanov repressed Soviet composers, Jews were figuratively and literally under fire — depicted in popular propaganda as a threat to Soviet society. Braun writes that “Jewish culture, including musical culture, existed and exists on the borderline of the permitted, and the undesirable even ‘anti-Soviet.’ This paradox of the permitted but undesired, and the forbidden but not unlawful, has created a highly ambiguous situation in Soviet culture regarding the employment of Jewish themes and motifs in art.”²² Despite the official Soviet stance toward Jews and Shostakovich’s own precarious situation, he often incorporated Jewish history, poetry, music, or some combination of the three into his music, especially during the last years of Stalin’s rule. Between Zhdanov’s appointment in 1946 and Stalin’s death in 1953, he composed *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, a violin concerto, a quartet, *24 Preludes and Fugues*, and *Four Monologues*, all of which feature some measure of “Jewishness.”

Shostakovich referenced Jewish idiom in two ways. First he borrowed musical idioms from Klezmer, a hybrid of liturgical and secular folk music created by Ashkenazic Jews in Eastern Europe. The introspection and exuberance of Klezmer music appealed to Shostakovich as a medium for expressing a broad range of emotions, especially “laughter through tears”, a long-standing facet of Jewish and Russian culture.²³ Shostakovich also employed non-musical references to Jewish life, particularly in his *Thirteenth Symphony*. The composition contains no traces of folk music, but instead, was inspired by Yevgenii Yevtushenko’s poem “Babi Yar” which memorialized the Nazi massacre of Jews in Kiev during World War II.

Perhaps Shostakovich’s most overt and comprehensive reference to Jewish culture was made in his song cycle, *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, a work which encompasses a broad spectrum of Jewish culture, both musically and non-musically. The work was composed “for the drawer” in 1948 and was not given a public performance until 1955 once Stalin was safely in the ground. Soon after World War II, a book of Jewish song lyrics was published; Shostakovich chose

²¹ Wilson, 226-27.

²² Joachim Braun, “The Double Meaning of Jewish Elements in Dimitri Shostakovich’s Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1985): 69.

²³ Reference to a quote in Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich and Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: the memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); “I never tire of delighting in [Jewish folk music], it’s multifaceted, it can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It’s almost always laughter through tears” (156).

eleven of the poems and wrote new music for them, some of which is based on the traditional Klezmer style.²⁴ Vocal music was a great favorite of the Soviet state “because the proper ideological content [could] be put into the words of the chorus more surely and more concretely than into the sounds of orchestral instruments.”²⁵ It is, therefore, highly ironic that Shostakovich used the state-preferred form of music to offer one of his most overt critiques of Soviet policy.

His choice of poems was quite revealing (and timely) as they repeatedly mention imprisonment, the grief of assimilation, poverty, hunger, death, etc. Again, such problems were not acknowledged in Soviet society and certainly had no place in art intended to inspire and encourage the masses. Defying the official agenda, Shostakovich created a record of, and commentary on, government abuses by incorporating Jewish themes into his own music. In a detailed examination of Shostakovich’s work, Joachim Braun explains:

The use of Jewish elements in Shostakovich’s music reaches far beyond their specific and “colorful” Jewishness. [...] It is in fact a hidden language of resistance communicated to the aware listener of [sic] its subtle meaning. Dissidence and opposition are here represented by the Jewish element which, because of its special place in Soviet culture, served as a perfect vehicle.²⁶

Shostakovich’s use of musical idioms alone was a tremendous expression of solidarity with Soviet Jews, but his strategic changes to the texts of the original Yiddish poems added another level of irony and criticism to the song cycle. Such alteration was in sharp contrast to his usual practice. While many composers adapt texts with great abandon, Shostakovich avoided making changes except when absolutely necessary or when an alteration was essential to the message of the entire work.

From Jewish Folk Poetry can be divided into two sections. The first eight songs of the cycle are uniformly mournful, while the last three seem to express contentment and joy. Despite the “obvious” meanings of these songs, most, if not all of them, can be read on many levels. In “Happiness”, the last song of the cycle, a blessed mother repeatedly proclaims, “And what I want to tell the whole land, about the joy and the light which are now my lot! Doctors, doctors are what our sons have become!” However, the original Yiddish song said nothing about

²⁴ Wilson, 234-35.

²⁵ Makanowitzky, 274.

²⁶ Braun, “The Double Meaning”, 80.

doctors. “And all should know about my happiness, which Soviet power has given to me. All my sons are engineers! The sun alone shines so bright on us.”²⁷ It is important to note the absence of “Soviet power” in Shostakovich’s version and the change from “engineers” to “doctors.” Why is this second change important? While the exact date of the text alteration is unknown, Sheinberg believes that “[‘Engineers’] was replaced by ‘doctors’, hinting perhaps at the Doctors’ Plot of 1952, when more than four hundred Jewish intellectuals — doctors, artists and scholars—were arrested and executed on Stalin’s orders.”²⁸ As was often the case in the Soviet Union, success inevitably brought scrutiny, suspicion, and jealousy; of all people, Shostakovich was able to understand this. Speaking of the Doctors’ Plot, Abraam Gozenpud, a famous writer and musicologist, remembers a popular “reaction from many well-known and famous persons demanding punishment of ‘the murderers in white coats’ (who were mostly Jews). Therefore, premiering *From Jewish Folk Poetry* at that time was an act of civic moral courage, and Shostakovich had to overcome much official resistance in order to receive permission for a public performance.”²⁹

Shostakovich’s text changes extended beyond the blatantly “happy” movements though. The third song of the song cycle, “Lullaby”, which is based on a Yiddish poem by Sholom Aleichem, also underwent alterations. In the original collection of poems, it read:

Sleep, my child, my beautiful...
Your father is in Siberia in chains,
Sleep, hushabye...³⁰

In Shostakovich’s lyrics though, the text directly implicates *a tsar’s role* in this imprisonment:

Your father’s held in chains in Siberia,
Kept in prison by the Tsar.
Sleep, hushabye...³¹

²⁷ Joachim Braun, *Shostakovich’s Jewish songs: from Jewish folk poetry, op. 79 : Introductory essay with original Yiddish text underlay* (Tel-Aviv: World Council for Yiddish and Jewish Culture, 1989), 87.

²⁸ Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, satire, parody, and the grotesque in the music of Shostakovich: a theory of musical incongruities* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), 239.

²⁹ Wilson, 238.

³⁰ Braun, “The Double Meaning”, 72-73.

Shostakovich's revision of Aleichem's lyrics can hardly be considered an inadvertent choice, particularly in light of the ever-present, ubiquitous threat of imprisonment and execution during Stalin's rule. Shostakovich's "Lullaby" automatically evoked memories of that time in Soviet audiences. Solomon Mikhoels' daughter, Natalya, remembers the premier of *From Jewish Folk Poetry* in 1953, shortly after Stalin's death:

In those years, a presenter always came out to announce the works...He declared that 'Lullaby', where the song contains [references to imprisonment in Siberia], 'it all took place in Tsarist Russia.' With that he left the stage. [...] people barely restrained themselves from laughing. For a long time after that Dmitri Dmitriyevich loved to repeat, 'It all took place in Tsarist Russia, it all took place in Tsarist Russia'.³²

Shostakovich repeated that line with the pervasive irony he was so well known for. To Shostakovich and everyone else in the hall, it was transparently obvious that the mournful lullaby was implicating a more recent, brutal tsar: Stalin.

Braun argues that there is a direct correlation between the intensity of Jewish idioms in Shostakovich's music and the depth of political meaning.³³ The references to Jewish culture went well beyond a mere expression of support for Soviet Jews though. Instead, Shostakovich presented their sufferings as a means of addressing political and social restraint throughout the Soviet Union. He made a deliberate decision to criticize the government-imposed repression which had played such a dominant role in his own life and in the lives of his fellow citizens.

While Soviet political leadership insisted that music should glorify the achievements of socialism and provide inspiration for the future, it also silenced political, ethnic, and artistic expression. Instead of unquestioningly attempting to satisfy the state's abstract demands for socialist realism, Shostakovich reshaped his methods of composition to create a musical history and criticism of Soviet policies and actions. Composed in the wake of a devastating political and personal crisis, Shostakovich's autobiographical *Eighth Quartet* became a memorial to his own life through the quotation of his banned works. In the midst of Stalin's final purges, Shostakovich turned to Jewish culture to condemn cultural totalitarianism and to express support for the oppressed in

³¹ See program notes, written by Timothy Day and Andrew Huth in Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich, Elisabeth Söderström [soprano], Ortrun Wenkel [contralto], Ryszard Karczykowski [tenor], Bernard Haitink [conductor]; *Symphony no. 15; From Jewish folk poetry* (London: Decca, 1993) 20.

³² Wilson 230.

³³ Braun, "The Double Meaning", 76.

Soviet society. Because of his uncompromising response, Shostakovich's work continues to serve as an insightful reflection on the past and as a relevant commentary on current artistic, ethnic, and political injustice.

Sarah Cunningham is a senior at the University of Washington with a particular interest in the intersection of Russian and Jewish history. Her research seeks to unravel serious political and historical issues by examining cultural expressions such as music and religion. Cunningham plans to pursue graduate work in Russian and Jewish history, and explore issues of identity, persecution, and repression.