

Leningrad: Siege and Symphony: The Story of the Great City Terrorized by Stalin, Starved by Hitler, Immortalized by Shostakovich

Brian Moynahan

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In Leningrad: Siege and Symphony, Brian Moynahan sets the composition of Shostakovich's most famous work-his seventh symphony- against the tragic canvas of the siege itself and the years of repression and terror that preceded it. Using a wealth of new material, Moynahan tells the story of the cruelties inflicted by Stalin and Hitler on a city of exquisite beauty and rich cultural history, and the symphony that inspired its survival.

Leningrad: Siege and Symphony: The Story of the Great City Terrorized by Stalin, Starved by Hitler, Immortalized by Shostakovich Details


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From Reader Review Leningrad: Siege and Symphony: The Story of the Great City Terrorized by Stalin, Starved by Hitler, Immortalized by Shostakovich for online ebook

Jorge says

"Leningrado: Sitio y Sinfonía" es uno de esos libros que inspiran a seguir viviendo a pesar las adversidades que se nos presenten y a pesar de los horrores y monstruosidades que aquí se describen.

El historiador Inglés Brian Moynahan nos entrega una obra muy vívida y llena de testimonios sobrecogedores. El libro está estructurado de manera cronológica, relatando los hechos que se fueron sucediendo bajo el marco del sitio de Leningrado durante la segunda guerra mundial, en especial durante los años de 1941 y 1942.

Es un trabajo ampliamente documentado lo que provoca que en ocasiones la propia vastedad del material haga compleja la exposición de tanta información, propiciando que a se pueda perder el hilo de la narración o se preste a confusión algún hecho en particular, en virtud de las múltiples acciones que se suceden durante las batallas y las complicadas maniobras y operaciones militares que aquí se asientan. Sin embargo el colosal esfuerzo que hizo este autor en su exposición me ha hecho adentrarme con verdadero interés en la totalidad de su lectura.

Tras el final de esta obra lo que queda al descubierto, una vez más, es la barbarie humana en toda su extensión e intensidad. No se me ocurren palabras que puedan abarcar o describir las demenciales atrocidades aquí citadas. El summum de la barbarie, diría yo. ¿Qué clase de locura guio a desatar aquellos acontecimientos? ¿Qué carga de maldad, de crueldad, de locura, de ansia de dominio y de inhumanidad debieron encerrar esas conciencias para encender una barbarie de este tipo?

Los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis se cernieron implacables sobre una alta cultura que descansaba en la hermosa ciudad de San Petersburgo, entonces Leningrado, habitada en aquel entonces por alrededor de 3 millones de personas, entre las que se encontraban familias felices, niños con ilusiones, padres de familia luchando por progresar, madres amorosas, genios artísticos, hijos responsables, funcionarios eficientes, estudiantes con ambiciones, ideólogos convencidos; todo esto arrasado despiadadamente por un cataclismo que no sólo fue intenso y sanguinario, sino también sumamente prolongado ya que el asedio alemán duró más de dos años y las represalias estalinistas años y años. Años de hambre, años de enfermedades, de sed, de pánico, de frío, de intenso sufrimiento de una población inerme e inocente y en donde dejaron su vida alrededor de un millón de civiles.

Parafraseando a Primo Levi: ¿Es esto el Hombre? La frase sirve de referencia tanto para aludir a lo abominable y vil que puede ser la especie humana, como también para apuntar lo sublime que puede llegar a ser esta especie en particular bajo circunstancias extremas. La brutalidad y crueldad humana aquí plasmadas sobrepasan los límites de nuestra conciencia y de nuestro entendimiento.

El libro relata con largueza la atrocidad humana pero también nos describe cómo tanto la población civil como el núcleo de artistas rusos de aquella generación demostraron unos niveles de heroicidad y de solidaridad fuera de lo común, lo que les permitió no rendir nunca su espíritu y estimular a sus semejantes a resistir. Artistas como Nadezhda Mandelshtam (1899-1980), Aram Jachaturian (1903-1978), Serguei Prokofiev (1891-1953), Anna Amjmátova (1889-1966), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), Olga Bergholz

(1910-1975), Boris Pasternak (1890-1960), Vladimir Sofronitzky (1901-1961), Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) y muchos más trataron de reconfortar a esas atormentadas existencias que formaban la población civil a través de lo que ellos podían y sabían hacer: crear emociones, generar aliento y retener la esperanza por aquello que parecía desmembrarse a diario: la vida humana.

Sin menoscabo del talento y el esfuerzo de todos y cada uno de ellos, la obra se centra en destacar la tenacidad y el talento de Dmitri Shostakovich y en especial sobre su esfuerzo creador para escribir su Sinfonía número 7, dedicada a la vida, al esfuerzo y a la esperanza de los habitantes de aquella ciudad. Apolo no había sido liquidado por Marte.

Shostakovich quería crear una obra que le hablara al mundo entero y en especial a los leningradeses sobre el destino de la heroica ciudad y sobre la valentía de quienes la defendían de todas las calamidades y tragedias habidas y por haber. Así mismo quería destacar la dignidad y la belleza de la música eslava en un mundo en guerra.

Es asombroso cómo, a pesar de todo, el pueblo ruso disfrutaba del arte, en especial de la música y de la literatura. La música mantenía viva el alma de aquellos heroicos habitantes de Leningrado y la esperaban con ansia y emoción como si fuera el maná que caía del cielo. Hasta en sus horas más oscuras se reunían algunos de los habitantes en lugares sombríos y desolados para escuchar algo de ese mágico y misterioso flujo sonoro que nutría esos corazones que aún palpitaban en cadáveres vivientes a esos espíritus desesperanzados y agónicos. Eran los momentos en que todas las condiciones de su entorno amenazaban cualquier atisbo de vida: el frío los consumía y el hambre los obligaba a incurrir en espantosos y abominables hechos guiados por el instinto más básico del ser humano.

La obra nos proporciona relatos estremecedores sobre la ciudad en ruinas y sobre la población amenazada por todas las calamidades que un ser humano puede sufrir. Por una parte las purgas de Stalin continuaban feroces, por otra parte los terrores desatados por Hitler sobre esa ciudad y sus alrededores acechaban a cada instante. Por si fuera poco también se presentaban el hambre llevada a extremos inimaginables y el frío inclemente que mataba y congelaba a las personas y por añadidura enfermedades, torturas, delaciones, traiciones y latrocinios. El panorama era desolador en la vida cotidiana del Leningrado de 1941-42. No tenía ya sentido vivir.

Este cataclismo está considerado como la mayor catástrofe demográfica jamás experimentada por una ciudad en la historia de la humanidad. Mientras esta catástrofe acontecía, Shostakovich trabajaba a marchas forzadas y con un espíritu inflamado por la adversidad y las penalidades que sufrían sus camaradas de Leningrado. El compositor trabajaba en lo que sabía hacer a fin de apresar el alma de los habitantes de esa ciudad y plasmar la epopeya humana que él estaba presenciando. El músico nunca se arrendó ante los cañones y los obuses del poderoso enemigo, el terror desatado no fue suficiente para ahuyentar a sus musas, al contrario: su capacidad de inspiración se exaltó.

A pesar de todas las vicisitudes, dramas, tragedias, muertes, horrores, ataques del enemigo, torturas brutales y sufrimientos descritos a lo largo de las páginas del libro y que ocupan la mayor parte de este texto, el centro dramático o emotivo de la obra, para mí en lo particular, lo constituye la trama y el contexto en que se da el estreno en Leningrado de la Sinfonía 7 de Shostakovich, llamada precisamente “Leningrado”. Lo que hay detrás del estreno es como para escribir un guion para una película.

La partitura se encontraba muy lejos de Leningrado y no había forma de hacerla llegar a su destino, tampoco había músicos suficientes para completar la dotación instrumental que se requería para su ejecución ya que algunos músicos habían perecido, otros estaban desaparecidos y de los músicos sobrevivientes algunos

estaban a punto de fenecer por hambre o frío y algunos otros estaban sumamente débiles y casi sin aliento como para acometer una compleja partitura musical como la escrita por Shostakovich.

Además el asedio del enemigo seguía siendo salvaje e incisivo y los cañones y ejércitos estaban ya a las puertas de la ciudad. Bajo estas condiciones no había forma de llevar a cabo la empresa de ejecutar la obra de Shostakovich en Leningrado.

Ahora que escucho esta música puedo transportarme a ese espacio y a ese tiempo: Leningrado, 9 de Agosto de 1942, e imaginarme a unos famélicos y disminuidos músicos tratando de acometer sus particellas de una nueva y complicada sinfonía, esperando expectantes, casi implorantes, la señal del director de la orquesta para empezar una labor tan gratificante como titánica. Unos músicos sacados de bandas militares o del Conservatorio para completar la orquesta y cuya mirada cansada y temerosa no dejaba asomar ningún destello de vida. Esos ojos sólo permanecían fijos en el director llamado Karl Eliasberg y descansan en una demacrada cara sostenida por un cuerpo abatido y encorvado, con tan solo un poco de comida en sus estómagos; sus labios trémulos y amoratados, los dedos entumidos por el frío y el ánimo por los suelos. De esta manera tenían que tañer sus instrumentos y descifrar una partitura compleja e intensa. No vestían de gala, sino se tapaban con algunos trapos y ropa vieja que habían podido conseguir para presentarse en esa caverna gélida que era la Sala Filarmónica.

También puedo imaginar cómo unas figuras espectrales que constituían el público se arrastraban por las calles arrasadas por los bombardeos y amenazadas por los delatores y las policías secretas. Esa pobre gente se arrastra fatigosamente hasta llegar a la Sala Filarmónica con ya sólo un poco de aliento. Un público exhausto, seres que parecían muertos en vida acudían a la caverna que era esa sala oscura y congelada de la Sala Filarmónica en busca de algún consuelo, en busca de materializar alguna ilusión. Sus cuerpos casi exánimes eran depositados en los asientos, no sin dolor en los huesos ya que su masa muscular estaba por desaparecer debido a los largos períodos de ausencia de comida. Pero dentro de ellos algo se mantenía con vida, una pequeña flama se movía en su interior y en cuanto sonaron los primeros acordes de esta sinfonía, algo cambió en la penosa vida de estas personas. Reapareció el ánimo en su ser más íntimo.

Era el día 335 del asedio. Era de noche y esa caverna vacía se encontraba sumamente fría, silenciosa y lúgubre. El cielo era de un color azul brillante y la sala resplandecía bajo ese cielo. Aparecen más cuerpos que parecen sombras arrastradas por algo sobrenatural y van ocupando penosamente algunos asientos. Las personas siguen llegando a ese inmenso espacio bajo un techo alto. De vez en cuando se escucha un poco de ruido: un grito o un quejido asoma en el ambiente. Ahora la sala o caverna se encuentra llena a su máxima capacidad, algunas personas han quedado fuera de ella en medio de un terrible frío y entonces se abren las puertas de la sala de par en par para que las personas de afuera puedan participar en el suceso.

Algo va a suceder. El pulso sube un poco, la presión arterial va a otra intensidad, la respiración se agita un tanto, los ojos cobran algo del antiguo brillo y en el cerebro hay una actividad un tanto anormal. Algo se despierta ahí adentro, lentamente, confortablemente, como en ligeras oleadas de una emoción contenida. Faltaba media hora para el comienzo de este evento y la artillería rusa hacía sonar sus cañones para contrarrestar algún posible ataque del enemigo. La música tenía que tomar su lugar.

Un diezmado grupo de músicos aparece en la parte principal de la sala cargando pesadamente sus instrumentos musicales. No visten con su típico traje blanco y negro, sino con unas ropas abigarradas, raídas y flojas; algunos visten casacas militares. No cabe duda que forman un grupo singular. Repentinamente, el director de la improvisada orquesta aparece demacrado pero firme y circunspecto, se coloca en su lugar de preponderancia y hace un despliegue de concentrado entusiasmo y de triunfo. Su llegada es motivo de una gran expectación, de esa clase de expectación que sólo aparece en los oficios religiosos en fechas especiales.

Su temblorosa y débil mano derecha apenas tiene fuerza para empuñar y alzar la batuta. Silencio momentáneo.

La batuta dibuja una figura en el aire y se impulsa serenamente. En dos mil cerebros los lóbulos frontales toman el control: no más tos, no más escupir, no más quejidos ni gruñidos de dolor. No más recuerdos dolorosos. La Sala Filarmónica es una caverna auténtica y ahora se oscurece más, los músculos se tensan, la respiración se detiene por momentos, gran parte del cerebro se adormece. La actividad neuronal de estos dos mil cerebros se incrementa. Cuando el director da la señal de iniciar el rito y suenan en el aire denso y frío de la caverna las primeras notas musicales, las neuronas de esos seres espectrales, se disparan en cascada. Algo ha estallado en su interior más profundo. Por fin ha iniciado la Séptima Sinfonía de Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich en la ciudad de Leningrado.

Sonido. Glorioso sonido. Sonido de un tipo que poco se oye fuera de la caverna. Patrones de sonido ascienden y giran en el aire, se doblan en sí mismos, se desvanecen y otros aún más grandiosos surgen y se elevan. Una muralla de más de cien sonidos diferentes se lanza sobre los ávidos oídos y las ahora exultantes conciencias de dos mil personas están rebotando en el alto techo de la caverna. Los tonos llueven sobre el auditorio por todos lados, encauzados hacia las orejas para ascender desde el aire vibrante a personas trepidantes, a descargas electroquímicas que surgen como fuentes hacia un cerebro en fuga de la realidad.

Algunas personas están atónitas, otras derraman lágrimas, aquellas lágrimas largamente contenidas por la muerte de sus familiares, por todos esos hombres justos torturados y asesinados, por la rabia contenida, por las vejaciones aceptadas con la mirada baja, pero la mayoría de esas personas están dominadas por la embestida inicial de la música.

Al principio transmite un placer arrollador, una especie de salirse del mundo de sufrimiento en que han vivido. Luego deleite, luego asombro. Luego melancolía y al final regocijo. Muy adentro de cada persona hay un transformarse, una sensación de liberarse de la gravedad.

Los rostros de los músicos están irreconocibles y dentro de ellos existía la interrogante de si podrían llegar hasta los últimos acordes de la monumental obra o cuándo aparecerían los primeros bombardeos de ese implacable enemigo fascista. Sus miradas contenían brillo, luz y creatividad interior para seguir tocando. A través de sus rostros podía vislumbrarse que de nuevo corría sangre por ellos dotándoles de un gesto de humanidad que hacía mucho habían perdido.

Hacia el final de la interpretación el público podía ver cómo los músicos desfallecían. Lo habían dado todo. Los pulmones sanos y fuertes que se requerían para soplar con enjundia los instrumentos de aliento ya no estaban presentes; la fuerza requerida para continuar tocando con coraje los instrumentos de cuerda se había extinguido y el colosal poder para aporrear con toda la fuerza posible las percusiones, no existía ya.

Algunos músicos parecían desmayarse y el final de la obra estaba cerca. Era algo sumamente dudoso que la ejecución de la obra se pudiese concluir al menos en ese 9 de Agosto. Entonces el público, como un solo cuerpo, antes de concluir el último movimiento, impulsado por la emoción desbordada y por el sentimiento de fraternidad se levantó de sus asientos en un gesto de profunda comprensión y de apoyo hacia aquellos músicos. Este gesto levantó la moral de los extenuados intérpretes y les dio nuevos bríos para que con su último aliento hicieran atronar el aire con unos sonidos que atravesaban el corazón y que les hacía reencontrarse con su humanidad.

Los exhaustos músicos en su último esfuerzo entregan alma, vida y corazón. Suenan vibrantes los platillos y

los timbales, tiembla la caverna con los últimos acordes de los alientos de metal, todo en una vorágine emotiva y sobrecogedora. Junto con la música estalla la conciencia de cada persona. Eliasberg es una figura monolítica, llena de autoridad y dignidad. La existencia se expande y todos ellos, músicos y público, se percatan de que pueden ser más de lo que han sido y que el mundo es más de lo que parece.

Sonidos finales y apoteósicos que revelan verdades que ya conocían esos sufrientes habitantes de Leningrado, pero que no podían expresar o salir de otra manera, y que recordarían hasta que el último eco de sus existencias se apagase.

Esos sonidos se pasearon por más de una hora en esa caverna que ahora es un recinto sagrado y misterioso que infunde paz y esperanza.

¡Éxtasis!

Precisamente hoy que termino esta reseña me he enterado que en este próximo Marzo estará, en mi ciudad, la Orquesta Mariinsky de San Petersburgo (¡antes Leningrado!) con Valery Gergiev dirigiendo entre otras obras, no la 7ª Sinfonía de Shostakovich, pero sí la 5ª que es igualmente impactante y emotiva. ¡Qué agradable sorpresa y qué casualidad!

Cuando vuelva a escuchar la 7ª. Sinfonía del gran Dmitri Shostakovich seguramente la escucharé de una manera diferente, con otros oídos y con una gran carga emocional que me hará rendir un pequeño homenaje a todas esas personas anónimas que sufrieron tanto, y a todas esas que murieron estérilmente y también, porque no, derramaré algunas lágrimas.

“Las aves de la muerte están en el cenit
¿Quién vendrá a ayudar a Leningrado?
...este firmamento carece de misericordia
Y la muerte vigila desde todas las ventanas”

Anna Ajmátova (1889-1966)

Susan says

Subtitled, "martyred by Stalin, starved by Hitler, immortalised by Shostakovich" it is clear before you even open this book that you are in for an emotive read. This is an incredible book about a city besieged by the Germans, starved, under attack, living in fear of their own regime and yet still able to remain defiant. Stalin notoriously disliked Leningrad, believing them bourgeois and distrusting their links with the Romanov family, while Hitler declared that Leningrad 'must disappear utterly from the face of the earth.'

This, then, is the story of the siege of Leningrad and of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, the 'Leningrad Symphony'; composed partly in the city as the Germans closed in and then finished after the composer and his family were flown to Moscow in 1941. The work was performed in Moscow, London and New York. Could it though, be played in Leningrad itself? It was a huge work, demanding an orchestra of over one hundred musicians. Yet the Leningrad Philharmonia had been evacuated to Siberia and only the Radio

Orchestra remained in the city - or what was left of them. The handful of members still alive were weakened by disease, hunger and the cold. Jazz musicians and members of dance or regimental bands were enlisted to play. Many died before the performance and those still alive could only rehearse for minutes at a time, unable to muster the energy to play. Shostakovich stated that, "I wanted to create the image of our embattled country, to engrave it in music."

"There has," the author states, "never been a performance to match it." On Sunday 9th August, 1942, the 'Leningrad Symphony' was first played to a city besieged by the Germans since September 1941. The German guns were less than seven miles from the Philharmonia Hall when the concert took place and yet, even under German fire and with a depleted and exhausted orchestra, the residents of Leningrad flocked to the Philharmonia. Skeletons dressed their pre-war finery it was an act of brave defiance. The author recreates this historical event in wonderful detail and explains what it meant - both to the people of Leningrad itself and the rest of the world. For example, it gave the Allies belief in the Russians and the story of their resistance and the performance of the piece (the score flown in over German lines) became a sensation. He also asks what the truth really was. Shostakovich certainly loved his city and cared about it, but even before the Germans arrived it was terrorised by Stalin. A city where even such a seemingly harmless hobby, such as stamp collecting, could be seen as a dangerous and anti Soviet activity.

Leningrad suffered terrible horrors under German bombardment as winter set in and food ran out. There was constant shelling, bombs falling, freezing temperatures and terrible hunger. The Germans also suffered from the weather, as the cold froze sentries to death, jammed their weapons and left them suffering and vulnerable in insufficient winter clothing. In Leningrad itself, the author tells terrible, heart rending stories of human suffering, of how people resorted to cannibalism, were starved, frozen and exhausted and yet still the purges, arrests and denunciations of the Stalinist regime continued unabated; adding even more horror onto an intolerable situation. This then is a brilliant account of that music, that city and that time, which will undoubtedly stay with you for a long time should you read it. If you like this book, and I have no doubt that you will, you might also enjoy the novel *The Conductor*, which is also about the performance of the Leningrad Symphony.

Charlie says

A most difficult yet extremely interesting book to read. The story is about Dmitri Shostakovich's struggle to finish his work on the Seventh Symphony during Stalin's Terror and Hitler's siege on Leningrad. Leading up to the Seventh Symphony, other Shostakovich's works were presented in concert that energized the citizens of Russia and the world. Musicians were hard to find since many were feeble and dying from Stalin's Terror, starvation, and fighting for the Red Army.

Difficult to read because the way the author, Brian Moynahan put this book together. Took me a little while to understand his format but as I read further into the book it eventually came together. Yep, well worth the effort. AND I did win this free book from Goodreads.com.

Peter Mcloughlin says

This book is on the siege of Leningrad during WWII and the composer Shostakovich making of his seventh symphony in honor of the beleaguered home city. The seventh symphony was very popular in the U.S. who

had joined Russia in the fight against Germany. The story is also about the horrors that Shostakovich endured under the Stalinist purges and paranoia of the NKVD in the 30s and Starvation of the city as it was surrounded by Nazi forces in the winter of 41/42. Links both the large of the war and Leningrad to smaller world of Shostakovich living under fear of the enemy and his own government under totalitarianism. Good history.

Ruth says

This book was so long and detailed I did wonder if it would take as long as the original siege to get through it. But I finally got there and it can now nestle in the bookshelf between 'Stalingrad' (Beevor) and 'Archangel'(Harris). Surely someone's written 'Vladivostok'?

I've read a few books about Russia and St Petersburg, even went for a honeymoon there (although my darling husband did ask if we could visit Leningrad as well). But this is the first time I've really, REALLY, been hit by the awfulness of the siege. Moynahan works his way from summer 1941 to the performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony in the city in July 1942. Month by month there is a litany of more musicians dropping dead of hunger amongst the most appalling conditions. Probably the truth is that the city was able to survive a second winter because so many had died the previous year - and many of those who had survived had done so through cannibalism.

Can music really express an experience? I have my own tiny story about the 7th. I went to hear it at the Liverpool Phil with my mother when I was in my 20s. We were late so I didn't read the programme notes and I had no idea of the background or when it was written. I found it long and difficult but can clearly remember thinking "this is all about war; it FEELS like war."

Don't normally quote at length from a book, but I feel the end of this one is worth recording:

"The performance in the martyred city is perhaps the most magnificent and certainly the most moving, moment ever to be found in music. Through it, the great city on the Neva retained its artistic soul, in the face of its attempted annihilation by Stalin and Hitler. Those who played showed a courage that gave comfort and confidence to an audience that, like themselves, had already passed far beyond what we might suppose to be their breaking point.

All that is best in humanity was seen in those eighty minutes in the Philharmonia, to have survived all that the lowest and most cruel had flung at it." (p488)

Steve says

I've been a fan of Shostakovich's 7th Symphony since I first heard it, over 20 years , and was somewhat familiar with the conditions leading to its creation. However, this book goes into incredible detail over 500 pages of month by month descriptions of what was happening in the city of Leningrad during the siege. This is not a story for the weak of stomach, as the author goes into great detail on the growing desperation in the city as the blockade went on and on without relief over the winter of 1941/1942. If the Nazi attacks weren't enough, the insanity of Stalin continued to purge people who weren't sufficiently falling in line with the party policies. Through it all, the people insisted on surviving, and when the symphony was played, they found new resolve. This is a truly fascinating book for anyone interested in World War II, the Stalin years,

Shostakovich, and the ability of the human species to survive against the greatest of odds.

No oil for pacifists says

Bogs down in places; wanted more about the music, less about the prolonged battle between evil and evil. Still, good pieces, and some great quotes; more detailed review to follow.

I agree with most of this:

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/article...>

Marita says

"The birds of death stand at the zenith.
Who will come to help Leningrad?
Make no noise around – it is still breathing,
It is still alive, it can hear everything:
It hears, on the damp bed of the Baltic,
Its sons moan in their sleep
And from its depths, the wails 'Bread!' rising up to the seventh heaven.
But this firmament is without mercy.
And from all the windows, death looks out."
(Anna Akhmatova)

+++

Five stars, but did I actually enjoy reading this book? The answer is both yes and no. The book is interesting, very well researched, detailed and comprehensive, the writing is good and the facts are presented without sentimentality. Both the Russians and the Germans have a say. So why any reservations? Quite simply this: it is absolutely gut-wrenching and I had to take more and more breaks as the story wound its way deeper into the siege.

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First there was the terror. Author Brian Moynahan explains how the Stalinist terror started with the murder of a friend of Stalin's. From here it escalated out of all proportion and I was astounded by the absurdities and stupidity, as for not much reason at all the top ranks of just about everything were depleted. Amongst others various stamp collectors, orientalist, astronomers, architects, artists, poets and musicians were regarded as a threat and therefore imprisoned or eliminated. Composer Dmitri Shostakovich came under scrutiny and his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was deemed to be offensive. It didn't take much to offend Stalin. The armed forces were stripped of their top echelon.

Then war broke out. Details of the siege and of the various battles are provided, complete with numbers of dead and injured. It is described from both points of view, i.e. that of the Russians and the Germans. The book is peppered with quotes from Russian and German witnesses, soldiers and the besieged. During this time the Stalinist purge continued. The terror, war and siege augmented by severe cold and hunger brought

out the best and the worst in humanity. Stalin's terror encouraged denouncements by friends, neighbours and even worse, by family. It was often a good way to lay one's hands on someone else's apartment. Within the besieged city there was great courage, many acts of bravery and countless acts of kindness, but black market profiteering flourished and starving people were driven to cannibalism.

What is absolutely magnificent is how the arts, and in particular music, not only survived but triumphed. Even as musicians dropped dead like flies, the proverbial show went on. Many concerts were held in the besieged city. As the temperature dropped musicians piled on coats, hats and gloves with fingers cut off to play in unheated halls which were packed to capacity. The story of composer Dmitri Shostakovich is woven through this tale. How, under very difficult circumstances he composed his seventh symphony which culminated in the famous propaganda performance and radio broadcast on the 9th August, 1942 and was conducted by Karl Eliasberg. The public dressed in pre-war finery hanging on their skeletal frames like sacks. Even though the surviving musicians were cold, hungry and frail, they turned up for rehearsals and on the big day they gave their all. The concert was relayed to the Germans as well by means of propaganda loudspeakers. Just prior to the concert the Russians launched a big offensive which meant that concert goers could get to the concert hall safely, and shortly after the concert the nearby Germans once again attacked.

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Two excellent novels about Dmitri Shostakovich are:

The Noise of Time by Julian Barnes and

The Conductor by Sarah Quigley which focuses on the famous performance of Shostakovich's 7th symphony.

Should it be of any interest to you, my reviews of these two books may be found here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Another book which may be of interest is Galina: A Russian Story which is the autobiography of famous Russian soprano, Galina Vishnevskaya who barely survived the Leningrad siege. She was also the wife of celebrated cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

Imi says

Despite owning this for years, I've decided I'm not going to read it in full. I've only skimmed it in parts so far, but I'm getting the sense that Moynahan may have been too taken in with the controversial claims made in Volkov's Testimony: The Memoirs (the so-called authorised memoirs of Shostakovich) and that makes me feel a little uncomfortable. (See Laurel E. Fay's books and articles for more information on how the authenticity of these "memoirs" was never properly vetted). I've read plenty on these events anyway and doubt I'd gain too much more from this anyway.

Patrick says

There are a few great concerts in history that I would love to have heard. They are long in the past, such as the premiere of Beethoven's 5th, a four hour long concert in December where the heating failed. To hear that music as those concertgoers heard it that night would be magnificent. I feel the same way about the premiere of Shostakovich's 7th in Leningrad. It had received its first premiere months earlier in Kuibyshev, where the composer and his family had been evacuated to. He had been evacuated in October of 41, as the siege began.

Over that winter Leningrad would become a hell on Earth. Hitler intended for the city to be starved to death, and he came close to doing just that. From October of 41 to June of 42, 650,000 Leningraders perished. That is more fatalities than the American armed forces experienced during the entire war.

Moynihan's descriptions of the suffering are harrowing in the extreme. Stories of the art collector Fyodor Notgaft and his third wife, whose bodies were discovered by Notgaft's second wife, compelling her to commit suicide, or the stories of people dragging bodies to cemeteries on children's sleds, or the stories of cannibalism scratch at one's soul. But the book is not simply about the siege, it is about Stalin's Terror as well, where the residents of Leningrad came under intense scrutiny. Shostakovich lived with the constant fear of arrest and death. He certainly lost many friends and family to the Terror. This Terror didn't end just because the Germans were laying siege to the city, and it didn't end when the Soviet's won the war either. The mind boggles at the suffering.

All of this is why the Leningrad premiere of the 7th is so important. It didn't come until August of 42. The Leningrad Philharmonic had been evacuated, and the orchestras that had remained were ravaged by death and starvation. Eliasberg, the conductor who would lead the survivors, was forced to find anyone who could play an instrument, including some soldiers that had served in military bands. Before the premiere began, Soviet artillery began a precise two-hour long bombardment of German artillery in order to insure that the symphony would not be interrupted. The starving and the sick came to hear the music that had been dedicated to them, to their resistance. Nikolai Tikhonov wrote of the premiere, "Perhaps it was not so grandiose as in Moscow or New York. But in Leningrad it had something authentic, something that joined the storm of music with the storm of combat around the city. It was born in the city, and perhaps only in this city could it have been born." That night the people of Leningrad probably heard something different, something rare.

That is perhaps the success of this book. It made me understand how important the 7th was to the people of Leningrad. Of course, it had other meanings. For the Western allies of the Soviets, it was a symbol of the decency and humanity of their Soviet allies, representative that the Soviets were fighting for human freedom against the fascist hordes. Shostakovich and the people of Leningrad knew that that could not be further from the truth. The 7th was a boon to Soviet propagandists, but it was a boon to the people of a city that were suffering. Like a lot of my feelings on Shostakovich, I'm still uncertain where I stand. Musically, I still think that the 7th is one of his worst symphonies, probably only better than the 12th. But it had an extra meaning when it was written, and I cannot ignore that. It is evident that Moynihan wants to make people understand that the people of Leningrad bravely fought against Nazism, even though they themselves suffered under Stalinism. He wants us to reassess this battle as one representing the bravery and defiance of the people of Leningrad, not simply a myth of Stalin's creation. It's hard not to be convinced by the end of this book.

Norman says

This is a staggering work relating the tale of how Shostakovich wrote his amazing 7th Symphony against the backdrop of Soviet repression, Nazi invasion and the dreadful experiences from the siege of Leningrad. It makes a fantastic pairing to read such an incredible story of a piece of music and then go listen to it, with the book bring the piece even more alive as the stories infuse the music with depth and feeling and a sense of place and time. One slight criticism is the book ends almost immediately after the performance is played (August 42) leaving a quick wrap up of the final year of the siege, end of the war and the rest of the composer's life. In spite of this I still give it 5 stars; it is a great read and one that will linger in the memory a lot more than many other books.

Rob Weedon says

You are in a besieged city of 3 million people, you can starve to death, freeze to death, be blown up by artillery or aerial bombardment, be murdered for a scrap of food or be unexpectedly seized, tortured and shot by the secret police. So what do you do?

You put on a performance of a new symphony by Shostakovich!

Connie says

When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, they quickly headed for Leningrad and cut off the supply routes into the city. The only way food and other supplies could be brought into Leningrad was to use boats to cross Lake Ladoga. When the weather turned frigid, they switched to trucking supplies across the ice, hoping the ice would hold. People were eating tree bark, sawdust, leather, cats, dogs, rats, and some even resorted to cannibalism during the long winter.

The Russian people also had to contend with the NKVD, the secret police, who arrested, tortured, and killed people on trumped up charges. Stalin was so paranoid that he had his most experienced officers shot by the NKVD which made the military position even more precarious against the more experienced Germans. Stalin, who came from a humble background, was especially harsh on the more cultured citizens of Leningrad. The composer Dmitri Shostakovich was always very nervous that he would be brought in for questioning by the NKVD if Stalin disapproved of his music.

Shostakovich and his family were evacuated from Leningrad in the autumn of 1941, and he finished his Seventh Symphony, dedicating it to the city of Leningrad. Although it was performed in several other cities first, the performance in Leningrad on August 9, 1942 was the most unforgettable. Since most of the musicians in the city had been either evacuated or died from hunger, it was difficult to put together an orchestra of over 100 musicians to play the 80 minute symphony. The brass and the woodwinds were too weak to blow their instruments without fainting, and the strings were exhausted from holding their violins. Extra food rations were given to them so the skeletal musicians managed to play. The Seventh Symphony announced to the world that Leningrad would endure. It also showed what joy and hope that music can bring under the most tragic of circumstances.

The book also tells of the difficult winter faced by the soldiers of both sides since they had inadequate food, clothes, fuel, and supplies. In January 1943 the siege of Leningrad was broken, although the city was not entirely liberated until 1944.

The author includes an enormous amount of detail as he covers the time from June 1941 to August 1942. This gave a good sense of what the people of Leningrad and the soldiers had to endure. It probably could have been edited down a bit since some of the stories were repetitious. The strength of this moving account of the siege of Leningrad is that the history is approached from many different angles.

Chrissie says

The book pulled me in. It is an excruciatingly difficult read.

The primary focus is the siege, not the man. This is not a biography of the composer Shostakovich. Both this book and *Symphony for the City of the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad* complement each other. The latter book has more about the composer, his personality, his family and his life up to and through the siege. Moynahan, historian and journalist, documents the battles and the military strategies with much more detail. (The paper book has maps; these are not provided in the audio format.) The book is an accumulation of a huge number of individual experiences of people who were there during the siege and who fought in the battles. It is filled with quotes taken from diaries and letters. We hear hungry, lice-ridden combatants from both sides. German soldiers of all ranks, Russians, not just soldiers but also the starving and dying within the city, musicians and artists, wives and children, widowers and widows and orphans andNKVD interrogators! The Russians were battled from without and from within, by Hitler and the Germans, by Stalin and his accomplices. A misspoken word meant immediate death or deportation to the Gulag.

Events are haunting. The writing is vivid. Reading large portions at a time is difficult. There are explicit references to cannibalism, a woman admits to eating her own newborn child. A starving orphan breaks his silence, at least for a while having been given his daily ration of half an egg. That there are so many quotes, from people who were there, makes what we are told heart wrenching.

Yet the quantity of quotes and details is daunting. Some editing wouldn't have hurt. You switch between Germans and Russians, the starving and the soldiers as well as the NKVD agents. Who is speaking now?! You switch locations too - Leningrad, Moscow, Kuibyshev. It is in Kuibyshev that Shostakovich completed the symphony. You follow the process by which the Seventh Symphony came to be written and finally performed in Leningrad on August 9, 1942, the 335th day of the siege. In the audio format is easy to get confused.

The symphony may be marvelous, but it was also propaganda. Stalin's propaganda.

I absolutely loved the narration by Jamie Parker. I loved how he read the quotes. I loved how he described what was happening. I think it is totally terrible that the audiobook has no accompanying PDF file with maps and dramatis personae. These are in the paper book! Furthermore, that a portion of the symphony itself is not played in the audiobook is downright unbelievable!

Gaylord Dold says

Moynihan, Brian. *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony, The Story of the Great City Terrorized by Stalin, Starved by Hitler, Immortalized by Shostakovich*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2015 (542pp.\$30)

Stalin despised Leningrad that, as St. Petersburg, had been the locus of the October coup d'état conducted by old-line Bolsheviks who were, one-by-one, being shot in the Great Terror. Designed and elaborated by Peter

the Great, himself a demented autocrat, St. Petersburg was a center of culture where art, music, poetry and literature flourished, more Baltic than Russian. Home to Dostoyevsky and Pushkin, a city constructed of granite and stucco, not wood like Moscow, St. Petersburg represented everything that Stalin negated in his ideology—gaiety, thoughtfulness, and refinement. When Kirov, the local party boss and Stalin's stubbornly libertine henchman, was assassinated in 1934, Stalin sent his NKVD thugs rampaging through the city. Large numbers of writers, poets, artists, musicians, military and party leaders, Finns, Poles, Jews and Germans disappeared into the Gulag, never to re-appear. Stalin unleashed waves of death on Leningrad for years afterward, continuing to purge the people there as Hitler attacked the city in June 1941.

Before that came the Nazi-Soviet Pact, that unholy back-scratching session between Hitler and Stalin. The Russians, for a year, sent grain and oil to Germany. The grain fed Hitler's attacking armies in Scandinavia, the Low Countries and France. Russia's oil fueled the hordes of bombers raiding London and the Messerschmitts accompanying them. Germany's hard currency financed Stalin's military build-ups, his take-over of eastern Poland, and his aggressive war against Finland. It was a perfect storm until, in late June 1941, Hitler did the unthinkable and invaded the Soviet Union. Hitler's Northern Army advanced towards Leningrad, encircled it, and by September, had almost entirely cut off a city of 2.3 million people from food, fuel, and medical supplies.

Brian Moynihan is a widely respected citizen historian, noted foreign correspondent and latterly the European editor of the Sunday Times, with first-hand experience in Vietnam, Laos, the Middle East and Africa. His specialty, though, is Russian history, and his books about that country include "Claws of the Bear", a history of the Red Army and "Comrades", a study of the 1917 Revolution. In "Leningrad: Siege and Symphony", Moynihan has managed a brilliantly conceived and executed account detailing, month by month, the horrific trials of Leningrad's millions, with the composer Shostakovich and his famous Seventh Symphony providing Stalin a reservoir of propaganda for the war effort. Drawing on a wealth of new material including transcripts of never-before available NKVD interrogations, diaries that have just come to light, interviews and recently released government documents, Moynihan rivets the reader with a monstrously detailed and almost inconceivably pulse-pounding story of death and survival. And in the midst of all the horror, Leningrad's cultural life—its orchestras, ensembles, theater, opera and literary salons continued to operate, just as its musicians, writers, dancers, opera singers and poets died by the thousands. "Siege and Symphony" is among a handful of new classics of Russian historiography unleashed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, a collapse that opened to view the regime's rotten secrets.

Madness, brutality and courage lay at the heart of the siege. Between June 1941 and August 9, 1942, when Shostakovich's symphony was finally played in Leningrad by an motely group of half-starved musicians gathered from here and there (cellars, attics, bomb-shelters), the city's population had been cut by more than half. Starvation and cold killed more than German bombs. Most of the city's dogs and cats had been roasted or put in stews, along with horseflesh. The bones of butchered animals were boiled for hours to extract marrow. Books were stripped of their covers and the glue in bindings melted for use in soap. Wallpaper was stripped from walls and the dried paste eaten. Linseed, rich in fatty acid, and glycerine from tooth powder and cold cream was eaten too, for their few calories. People collected pine needles and fir bark; rye flour was cut with twenty-five percent cellulose. Sawdust was used to cut flour as well. Tanneries were swept of leather that was boiled and used as a paste substituting for meat patties. Sheep guts were found in warehouses and processed with an aromatic herb to make a jelly that was mixed with flax seed and machine oil, and served as ersatz meat. Smokers used crushed maple leaves in their cigarettes.

Fear of cannibals plagued the city. Individuals starving alone in their freezing apartments ate their wives or husbands, even their children. Emaciated bands of cannibals roamed the frozen snowy streets, cutting up cadavers. Commercial cannibalism began with chopping off parts from corpses lying in their homes or on the

streets. Olga Trapistina-Matveenko helped carry the body of her grandmother downstairs to the courtyard on the night she died. In the morning, she found the body cannibalized, probably by professionals who sold “meat pies” in the alleys around the Haymarket. The NKVD made half-hearted attempts to arrest cannibals, but there were too many. People were murdered for their ration cards and the murder victim often cannibalized as well.

The story of Shostakovich is not heroic. He, along with his wife and two children, were flown by private plane to Moscow, and later trained to a Volga town called Kubyishev where he lived in relative comfort while his fellow Leningraders died in droves. In July, at the start of the siege, he’d begun composing the Seventh in honor of Leningrad. He worked steadily, under constant pressure from the NKVD, the staunchly Stalinist Composer’s Union, as well as *Izvestia*, which criticized the “formalism” that could get a musician shot. At nearly eighty minutes long, and utilizing a large array of instruments requiring over 100 players, the symphony was a monster. When it debuted in London, it was hailed by the audience and panned by critics. Shostakovich appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*; his symphony was supposedly a paean to Leningrad’s spirit and an anti-fascist blast; in reality it was a propaganda coup for Stalin who needed American tanks, trucks and food. Life under Stalin was frightening and arbitrary. Those who survived to write or compose were no different from those who were shot. A whim stood between life and death. Shostakovich lived until 1976, a pale, weary, frightened artist in a cruel land.

Moynihan’s book is a monumental achievement—a lasting cultural, military, political, social and personal history of one of the five or six defining horrors of the twentieth century, a century in which horror was almost commonplace. With its photographs, maps and complete index, “Leningrad” is a work of lasting importance.
