

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 410

“The Siege of Leningrad II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Siege of Leningrad was the longest siege of the war. It was the longest siege since ancient times, and the deadliest siege of all time.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 407. The Siege of Leningrad II.

Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906 in what was then St. Petersburg. His mother began giving him piano lessons when he was nine years old, and immediately he demonstrated considerable musical talent.

In 1919, when he was 13 years old, Dmitri entered what was by then called the Petrograd Conservatory, a prestigious school of music. Its director at the time was the celebrated composer Alexander Glazunov. Shostakovich studied piano and composition at the Conservatory, and appears to have impressed most of the faculty, including Glazunov himself.

For a time, Shostakovich earned a little money on the side by playing the piano at a silent movie theater. From this experience, he developed a taste for adding to his compositions playful instrumental parts that sometimes poked irreverent fun at the larger work.

In 1925, when he was 18, Shostakovich traveled to Moscow to attend a concert that included one of his own works. His composition didn't attract much attention, but it gave him the opportunity to meet Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Red Army commander and hero of the Russian Civil War. Tukhachevsky was impressed with the young man and became something of a patron to him.

Later that year, Shostakovich graduated from the Conservatory. His graduation composition was his First Symphony, which impressed a sufficient number of people to earn it a 1926 premiere with what was by that time called the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. The symphony was an

immediate success. A year later, it received its first performance outside the Soviet Union with Bruno Walter and the Berlin Philharmonic. The symphony had its American premiere in 1928 with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, who were also the first to record the symphony. Shostakovich had by this time an international reputation. In fact, Shostakovich will prove to be the only composer whose artistic career unfolded entirely within the Soviet Union to achieve substantial worldwide recognition.

He spent the next several years pursuing both composition and performance. In 1927, he attended the first International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, where he won honorable mention, a result that disappointed him.

In the Soviet Union of the 1920s, the era of the more liberal “New Economic Policy,” a group of more radical musicians formed the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians, or RAPM. This was a group that became doctrinaire, ultra-Bolshevist, intolerant, and generally leftier-than-thou. They were anti-Western, anti-jazz, anti-folk music, anti-patriotic music, and pretty much anti-everything, except for revolutionary songs with propaganda lyrics sung by choirs, and Beethoven. They decided Beethoven was the voice of the French Revolution, so that meant he was okay.

I mention them because in 1930 came the debut of a satirical opera composed by Shostakovich, titled *The Nose*. It was based on an absurdist 19th-century story by Nikolai Gogol. In the story and in the opera, a minor St. Petersburg official wakes up one morning to discover that his nose has left his face, and it is out in the city seeking a place for itself. It’s a satire of politics and social status and probably a lot of other things. It was a natural project for Shostakovich, who himself had a taste for the absurd or irreverent in music.

The Nose has been described as a Monty Python skit set to music. Audiences found it baffling and it was roundly condemned by the RAPM, who managed to get the work suppressed. It would not be performed again in the Soviet Union until 1974.

In 1932, the RAPM, a non-governmental organization, was ordered dissolved and replaced with a state musicians’ organization. Shostakovich, like many Soviet musicians, breathed a sigh of relief. But his political troubles were just beginning.

By this time, Shostakovich had largely given up piano performance in favor of composition. He spent the early Thirties composing another opera, *Lady MacBeth of Mtensk*, based on a short novel by Nikolai Leskov published in 1865. It is a story of a merchant’s wife, living in a remote rural region, who is frustrated by the 19th century’s attitudes toward women. She takes a lover and murders her husband. And the killings don’t stop there.

Shostakovich and his librettist co-wrote a program note that explained their view of the work as an expression of the unjust conditions under which women were forced to live in pre-Revolutionary Russia, framing the title character as a frustrated feminist who was lashing out at

the system using the only means available to her. That was smart politics. The opera opened on January 22, 1934 in Leningrad and two days later in Moscow. It was a hit with audiences and with critics. It played for two years in both cities, and a touring company took the opera to foreign venues, though the sex and violence in the story, set to lurid music, offended some in the West. A critic for the New York *Sun* described the opera as “pornophony.”

Soviet critics accepted Shostakovich’s interpretation of the title character and praised the opera as in line with Communist Party principles.

By the time the opera closed, the Soviet Union was in the throes of the Great Purge. Now, you might think, and indeed Shostakovich thought, that his success with critics and audiences meant he was safe. And if that wasn’t enough, he had the favor of Marshal Tukhachevsky, the great war hero, the man they called the Red Napoleon.

But you and Shostakovich are wrong. In January 1936, Moscow hosted a festival of Soviet music. The opera theatre in Leningrad contributed its two most successful productions to the event. *Lady MacBeth* and *Quiet Flows the Don*, a patriotic opera by a lesser-known Soviet composer, Ivan Ivanovich Dzerzhinsky. On January 17, Stalin, who seldom went to operas, attended a performance of *Quiet Flows the Don*. Afterward, he summoned the composer to his box to extol the opera as a shining example of socialist realism and praised its ideological value.

A few days later, while Shostakovich was preparing for a trip to Archangelsk for a concert performance, a friend alerted him that General Secretary Stalin would be attending the January 26 performance of *Lady MacBeth of Mtensk*, and he’d better postpone his trip to Archangelsk and be at the theatre that night, ready to present himself to the General Secretary when summoned.

Stalin did indeed turn up that night, with a larger entourage than he’d brought last time. This one included the foreign commissar, Vyacheslav Molotov, and the head of the Leningrad Party, Andrei Zhdanov. From backstage, Shostakovich kept an eye on Stalin. The General Secretary cringed at several moments in the opera, and, to the composer’s horror, he and his entourage left the theatre as soon as the opera was over, without speaking to Shostakovich or anyone else.

Shostakovich traveled to Archangelsk the following day as planned. The day after, January 28, he learned that day’s edition of *Pravda*, the newspaper of the Communist Party, included an editorial titled “Muddle Instead of Music,” lambasting his opera as vulgar and formalist, the latter being the harshest criticism that could be leveled against a work of art in the Soviet Union, and arguing that its popularity abroad merely showed that it “tickles the perverted taste of the bourgeois.” The editorial ended by declaring that the opera represented “a game of clever ingenuity that may end very badly.” That sounds like a threat to me.

In the weeks that followed, critics from across the nation joined the attack on the opera. Even critics who’d previously praised *Lady MacBeth* published follow-up pieces explaining that they had re-evaluated the work in light of these criticisms and decided that *Pravda* was right.

The Great Purge was just beginning, and while virtually all of its targets were members of the Party, the government, or the military, Dmitri Shostakovich was the first artist to be denounced for un-Soviet activities. He would not be the last. In fact, targeting Shostakovich, the Soviet Union's most celebrated artist, may have been meant as a signal to other Soviet artists: if they can come after Shostakovich, they can come after you.

Lady MacBeth of Mtensk, the most popular opera the Soviet Union had so far produced, was banned. It would not be staged again in the USSR until 1961, and then only in a revised version that toned down the pornophony.

For Shostakovich personally, those denunciations led to lost commissions and cancelled bookings and his income plummeted. He had been working on his Fourth Symphony when this all began, and for the following months, he kept at it until the symphony was finished. It was to premiere with the Leningrad Philharmonic in late 1936, but the orchestra cancelled the performance, claiming that Shostakovich had withdrawn the work. That might even have been true, but despite suggestions made on his behalf that he'd decided the work was unsatisfactory and planned to revise it, Shostakovich never changed or repudiated his Fourth Symphony. It was not performed publicly until 1961.

Shostakovich is said to have lived in fear of imminent arrest during this period. One story claims he spent nights in the hallway outside his family's apartment in Leningrad, so that if the NKVD came for him, they could take him away without disturbing his wife or their two young children.

But Shostakovich still held the favor of Marshal Tukhachevsky. That had to count for something, right? Well, to the shock of virtually everyone in the USSR, Tukhachevsky was arrested in May 1937. In June, he was convicted of treason and shot that very night. This not only meant that Shostakovich lost a powerful patron; it was also a clear signal to him, and to the Soviet Union generally, that no one was exempt from Stalin's wrath.

Shostakovich requested a meeting with Stalin. His request was denied, but he did get to meet with the Chairman of the State Committee on Culture to confess his errors and discuss how his music could better connect with the masses.

The end result was his Fifth Symphony in D minor, which premiered November 21, 1937 in a performance by the Leningrad Philharmonic. The second movement is sorrowful, which was frowned upon in Stalin's Soviet Union, but the work makes up for it at the end of the fourth movement, when the symphony modulates to D major and concludes by banging out a lengthy series of triumphant D major chords.

The symphony was a huge success with audiences—it got a long ovation at its premiere—and with critics, who were satisfied that Shostakovich had learned his lesson. In case anyone missed the point, two months later, just before the Fifth Symphony's Moscow premiere, an article appeared in the newspaper *Vechernyaya Moskva* under Shostakovich's byline, that described the

symphony as the composer's creative answer to the just and fair criticism of his work offered by the Party.

In Stalin's Soviet Union, you could never be certain that a newspaper byline accurately identified the real author of the piece, and it is generally accepted that Shostakovich did not write this one. Still, it made the point, and the point was that the Party could not only denounce an artist, even a famous one; it could bend even a famous artist to its own will.

The most notable difference between the Fifth Symphony and Shostakovich's earlier work is the complete absence of the sort of playful, sardonic melodies he was known for. This symphony was strictly serious.

Or was it? The way it pounds those D major chords at the end was so loud and insistent that one might suspect it was a sly parody. Was he producing what the Party wanted, or was he mocking it? In 1979, four years after Shostakovich died, a book was published in the US titled *Testimony*, which purported to be drawn from interviews with Shostakovich late in his life. It says of the Fifth Symphony, "I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat...It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing.'"

These words may or may not be from Shostakovich, but either way, they raise a fair point about the Fifth Symphony. Is this Shostakovich being serious, or is he being playful and sardonic in a different, subtler way? It's a question that comes up often in the works of Dmitri Shostakovich.

The success of the Fifth restored Shostakovich's standing in the Soviet Union. He got a position teaching composition at his alma mater, now the Leningrad Conservatory, which made him and his family financially secure.

Then, almost four years later, Adolf Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.

[music: Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 5*.]

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, the 34-year-old Dmitri Shostakovich attempted to enlist in the Red Army, but was turned down because of his poor eyesight, so he volunteered for the fire brigade of the Leningrad Conservatory, meaning he would help protect the building from German incendiary bombs. Recall from last week that young Yuri Ryabinkin was doing similar work to protect his school from German bombs at this same time. Unlike Yuri, Shostakovich was famous, so he was photographed in his fire helmet and the picture distributed as a bit of wartime inspiration. Everyone's doing their part, even the famous composer. That kind of thing.

On September 8, the Germans cut Leningrad off from the rest of the USSR and the siege began. On September 17, Dmitri Shostakovich announced over the radio that he had just completed the second movement of a symphony that would become his Seventh Symphony. In composing it,

Shostakovich was making a statement that, though Leningrad was surrounded, in the city life went on.

I described to you the first months of the Siege of Leningrad in the previous episode. As I told you then, in the early days of the siege, the only way in or out of the city was by air. Planes flew in with supplies and flew out with evacuees, although there weren't nearly enough planes or seats or cargo capacity.

The authorities in Leningrad decided who got one of the limited number of seats aboard the evacuation flights, and they decided early on that the celebrated composer Dmitri Shostakovich and his family would be among them. Shostakovich protested; he wanted to stay in Leningrad, but he was overruled. On October 1, 1941, Dmitri, his wife Nina, six-year-old daughter Galina, and four-year-old son Maxim flew out of Leningrad, along with sheet music and sketches for the Seventh Symphony.

Moscow was also in a perilous situation at the time, so the Shostakovich family was taken to Kuybyshev, as were many government officials and foreign diplomats. There he completed the Seventh at the end of December.

As you know, by that time, the situation in Leningrad was dire. Poor sixteen-year-old Yuri Ryabinkin had to be abandoned by his family on January 8, 1942, because he was too weak from starvation to evacuate with them. He presumably starved to death shortly afterward, likely on the same couch where his family left him. And that is where we left off last time.

Yuri was far from being the only Leningrader to starve to death in January 1942. People were dying at the rate of 3,500-4,000 every day in January; close to 100,000 for the entire month. February was the same, making those two months the deadliest period of the siege.

The last entry in Yuri's diary was dated January 6, 1942. There are many other diaries preserved from the Siege of Leningrad, but most of them, like Yuri's, taper off to nothing in January or February, because their authors were too weak from hunger to continue. Like Yuri, the starving lay motionless, because even slight movements were exhausting. Survivors report spending long periods of time thinking over their next movements, rehearsing them in the mind, and procrastinating, before finally taking action, even for something as simple as rolling over. People ceased speaking to each other. Why waste energy on talking?

For many, life was limited to collecting water, standing in line to collect food, and lying in bed. For most, the bread line was the only source of food for the family, putting the person in the queue, usually a mother, in a difficult situation. If no one in the family had the strength to stand in line, the entire family would starve. So should you give yourself your own ration and maybe a little more, to ensure you would be able to stand in line again tomorrow? Or should you give your children and your elders some of your own food to help keep them alive, at the risk that you would not be able to go out tomorrow, and all of you would starve?

Families varied in how they handled their slight rations. Some gobbled down everything as soon as it came into the home. Others divided it into three even tinier shares and tried to preserve some semblance of three meals per day.

Some fortunate few had access to off-ration food at their workplace, the stores where the food rations were distributed being one obvious example. Those people could eat a little more, but in most cases, you weren't allowed to take anything home for other members of your family.

Public services gradually ceased, as there was no one to keep them going. Water and sewer services failed, meaning Leningraders had to collect water wherever they could find it, water that was seldom safe to drink, which led to outbreaks of disease. Gas and electric service were only memories. Fire-fighting services disappeared; buildings sometimes burned for days because there was no one with the strength to put them out. Banks, schools, and police stations sat empty.

Hospitals had no heat and few doctors or other health care workers were strong enough to come to work. It didn't matter much, because most hospital patients were there because they were starving, and the hospitals didn't have any food either. Hospitals went weeks without changing patients' bed linens, so lice were endemic.

The winter of 1941-42 was a record cold one in Russia. German soldiers suffered for it; so did Leningraders. Neither homes, offices, nor factories had heat when outdoor temperatures were as low as -30°C. Living in the cold like this saps the body's energy, so for these starving people, the cold was life-threatening. People burned furniture and whatever other bits of wood they could get their hands on for some temporary relief.

In the streets, snow collected into drifts two meters high; enormous icicles hung from the unused tram wires overhead. No one was burning coal or driving vehicles, so the ice and snow remained a pristine white; a beautiful sight for anyone who had the strength to go out into the street to appreciate it.

Death often came in the streets. People making their way through the snow and the cold sometimes dropped dead mid-step. More often, exhausted citizens would sit on a step or a bench, just for a moment of rest, and never stand up again. Some remained where they died until the spring thaw. Others were collected by Red Army detachments that patrolled the streets for this purpose. Civilians often tied a bit of brightly-colored cloth to a corpse, which would stand out against the white snow and help soldiers find the body.

One Leningrader reported finding a frozen corpse on her way to work. The man was sitting on the sidewalk, back against a lamppost and carrying a backpack. He might have been on his way to attempt to escape the city over the ice of the frozen Lake Ladoga on foot and stopped to rest. She passed him every day, to and from work, and over the course of two weeks observed as his backpack disappeared, then his coat, then his clothes, then his flesh, until only bones remained. These were collected in May.

People died in their homes and workplaces too, their bodies preserved by the unrelenting cold until spring came. The bodies that were collected were disposed of in mass graves dug in cemeteries and parks. Leningraders parted by telling one another, “don’t end up in the trenches,” a reference to the many mass graves.

Some Leningraders bravely carried on through the worst. At one hospital, the pathologist lectured to residents and invented work for the lab assistants to do, just to keep everyone busy, on the theory that if they stopped to rest, they’d never get up again. The city’s Writers’ Union held a two-day conference on Baltic literature in February. Attendees broke up chairs and threw them into stoves as firewood between sessions.

The Leningrad Philharmonic continued to perform, as did the Leningrad Musical Comedy Theatre. That education and arts and culture continued in Leningrad during the siege was and is a source of great pride in the city and in Russia generally, although it must be noted that most members of the audience who managed to come to these performances seemed much better fed than the actors and musicians onstage, who were often so weak from hunger they could barely perform.

As winter progressed, increasing amounts of food and supplies came across the Road of Life, where vehicles trundled across the ice of Lake Ladoga. The Germans held the shore of the lake south of Leningrad, and attempted to advance along the lake’s southern shore, then its eastern shore and cut off Leningrad’s last remaining lifeline.

The Red Army held them back, but by early December, the Germans held enough of the southern shore of the lake to make it difficult to bring supplies to the lake. The nearest railway station was fifty kilometers away, and trucks had to carry everything over that distance, just to get to the lake shore.

The Red Army winter offensive included a drive to reclaim the southern shore of the lake, and by January, it was possible to bring trains right up to the Road of Life itself. As for the offensive, Stalin was encouraged by the difficulties the Germans were experiencing in the particularly harsh winter of 1941-42 and ordered a general offensive all the way up and down the front.

This was not a wise decision. The Red Army wasn’t ready for such an ambitious effort, and nowhere was that more true than at Leningrad. The Leningrad Front, the Red Army formation inside the city, was in no condition to begin an offensive, but orders are orders.

On January 7, 1942, the offensive began. The Red Army forces south of Lake Ladoga, having reclaimed the southern shore of the lake, were now ordered to punch through the German line and open a corridor to Leningrad that would allow trains to run to and from the city. Most of the Soviet forces facing Army Group North were unable to advance, but a few managed some minor gains.

And then there was the Second Shock Army, which broke a hole in the German line and advanced more than fifty kilometers toward Leningrad. Alas, and agonizingly, the Second Shock Army's advance got bogged down just eight kilometers short of the front line at Leningrad.

Meanwhile, in the city, increasing amounts of food and supplies were being delivered via the Road of Life. On January 24, the authorities raised the food ration for a second time, but Leningrad's food supplies were insufficient to provide everyone the promised amounts.

Two days earlier, on January 22, the seven-month anniversary of the war, buses began to run back and forth along the Road of Life and seats were now available to anyone who wanted to leave the city. More than a million people, mostly women and children, would evacuate the city in the coming months. Many families faced the agonizing decision of whether to flee the city and leave behind those who were too weak to travel, or remain and care for their sick, at the risk of the lives of the rest of them.

On March 5, Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony had its world premiere in Kuybyshev, performed by the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra, which normally performed in Moscow, but had been moved to Kuybyshev for safety when there were fears that Moscow might fall. The performance was broadcast across the Soviet Union. The Seventh Symphony premiered in Moscow on March 29.

With food supplies increasing and the population decreasing, Leningrad gradually reached the point when there was sufficient food to feed everyone who remained, who numbered around 600,000 by summer 1942, about 20% of the population at the beginning of the war. Everyone else was either dead or had left. With the arrival of the spring thaw, those who remained set to work clearing away the corpses and gradually restoring water, gas, and electric service. On April 15, the trams started running again. Grocers in Leningrad celebrated May Day by decorating their barren windows with cardboard fruits and vegetables.

The premiere of the Seventh Symphony in March raised the question of whether and how the symphony should be performed in Leningrad. The only orchestra left in the city was the Leningrad Radio Orchestra, and it was in sad shape, with only 15 members remaining. A call went out for musicians, and from across Leningrad they came, still weak from hunger, little more than walking skeletons, but carrying their musical instruments and with bright eyes. Leningrad was coming back to life.

Leningrad Radio had stopped broadcasting music in January; Party chief Zhdanov felt that music was inappropriate during the city's great crisis, and anyway, there weren't any musicians healthy enough to perform. But now there were. Sort of. The first rehearsal lasted only 15 minutes; the musicians were too tired to play any longer.

The authorities allowed the orchestra extra rations for the sake of getting the symphony broadcast and the morale boost that would provide. They didn't even have the score for the

Shostakovich symphony yet; the orchestra began by performing over the radio some old standards from composers like Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.

A copy of the conductor's score for Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony was flown into Leningrad in July, all 242 pages of it. Copyists wrote out the parts for the individual instruments by hand.

As spring came and things got a little better in Leningrad, they got a lot worse for the Second Shock Army, which spent months trapped in a salient, about fifty kilometers by fifty kilometers, behind the German line and connected to the rest of the Red Army only by a narrow passageway.

As there was clearly no hope of exploiting the salient they had created, the Second Shock Army's commander, Andrey Vlasov, asked permission to withdraw back behind the Soviet line. (Do you recognize that name?) Stalin denied the request.

When the spring thaw came, the ground the Second Shock Army held turned into a bog. The water and muck slowed the flow of supplies to a trickle, though Sovinform continued to highlight the success of the Second Shock Army and praise its determination in the face of repeated German counterattacks.

In May, with warmer weather arriving, Army Group North began an offensive meant to cut off the Second Shock Army. Now Stalin gave permission for them to withdraw, but it was too late. They were trapped. By early July, the Second Shock Army had been destroyed, its soldiers all dead or taken prisoner, except for the few who'd managed to fight their way back to the Red Army lines. General Vlasov was taken prisoner, too. Recall I told you in episode 402 how after his capture, he defected to the German side and helped create an anti-Bolshevik Russian Liberation Army.

In Leningrad, the advance of the Second Shock Army had raised hopes. Throughout the spring, Leningraders listened to Sovinform bulletins describing how the heroes of that formation were holding their ground against German counterattacks. In early July, the news bulletins stopped mentioning the Second Shock Army. Most people in Leningrad, and across the USSR, had by now learned what that meant: they had been defeated.

At the same time as this defeat came the loss to the Germans of the city of Sevastopol in the Crimea. This news hit hard in Leningrad. Sevastopol had been a sister city in suffering; like Leningrad, it had held out against the Germans since autumn 1941. If Sevastopol could fall, did that mean Leningrad might follow?

Adolf Hitler hoped so. He ordered Erich von Manstein, commander of the German 11th Army, the force that had captured Sevastopol, to head north, along with some of his army's best artillery and armor units, to prepare a final offensive to capture Leningrad, codenamed *Unternehmen Nordlicht*, Operation Northern Light.

Leningrad Radio announced that the broadcast of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony would take place on August 9. The Red Army strung up loudspeakers along the front line so the Wehrmacht could listen to the symphony, and hear for themselves a musical statement of Leningrad's defiance.

Keep in mind that, along with its other woes, Leningrad had been subject to repeated German artillery bombardments and, weather permitting, Luftwaffe bombing raids. When news of the concert was announced, German commanders planned a massive artillery bombardment to coincide with the scheduled performance, in hope of disrupting it. That would be an explosive statement of Germany's determination.

But Red Army commanders anticipated this. When the concert was about to begin, artillery units of the Leningrad Front began a bombardment of German artillery positions, in order to disrupt the planned attack and allow the performance to proceed. Russians got the message of Leningrad's determination to live on. Army Group North got the message, too. Leningrad was nowhere close to beaten.

The latter point was underscored less than three weeks later, when the Red Army began a second offensive to relieve Leningrad. Hitler was forced to order Manstein and his forces, which were preparing for Operation Northern Light, the planned German offensive to take Leningrad, to redeploy and oppose the Soviet offensive instead. This second Soviet offensive lasted six weeks and also failed, although it had the side benefit of forcing the Germans to cancel their own offensive.

On January 12, 1943, with Hitler and the Wehrmacht preoccupied by the battle for Stalingrad, the Red Army began a third offensive to relieve Leningrad. Hitler couldn't spare any resources to oppose it, and six days later, the Red Army succeeded in retaking the town of Shlisselburg on the shore of Lake Ladoga and linking up with the Leningrad Front.

The Red Army now controlled a corridor of land about eight kilometers wide that connected Leningrad with the unoccupied Soviet Union. The State Defense Committee ordered the construction of a railroad line along this corridor in thirty days.

In fact, it took only 19 days; the first supply train reached Leningrad on February 6. The Siege of Leningrad was at least partially lifted, but the Germans were still close by. The new railway was easily within artillery range and subjected to repeated German artillery bombardment, as was Leningrad itself. Still, it was now clear that Leningrad would survive.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank George for his kind donation, and thank you to Luka for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like George and Luka help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in

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In July, I plan to be at both Readercon in Boston and then Confluence in Pittsburgh, so if any of you happen to be attending either of those conventions, look me up and say hi.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the Eastern Front of 1943, now that we're all caught up. The Battle of Kursk is over, but the Germans are still retreating. We'll talk about that next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, henceforth often referred to as the Leningrad Symphony, was performed repeatedly in the Soviet Union as a gesture of patriotism. *Pravda* and other Soviet publications lavished it with praise. Soviet audiences often wept during performances and delivered thunderous standing ovations afterward.

The Soviet government flew a copy of the score of the Leningrad Symphony on a reel of microfilm to Teheran in April. From there, the British took the microfilm to London, printed out the score, then sent the film on to America. On June 22, 1942, the first anniversary of the German invasion of the USSR, the symphony received its European broadcast premiere in a performance by the London Philharmonic, conducted by Sir Henry Wood and broadcast by the BBC. Its British concert premiere was at a Proms concert in the Royal Albert Hall.

On July 20 in the United States, *Time* magazine put a picture of Shostakovich in his firefighter's helmet on its cover, with the caption: "Fireman Shostakovich—Amid bombs bursting in Leningrad he heard the chords of victory." The accompanying article spoke of a "battle royale" among America's most prominent conductors over who would win the honor of conducting the symphony's US premiere.

That premiere would be performed by the NBC Radio Orchestra on July 19 and broadcast nationally over the NBC radio network, but who would conduct? At this time, the orchestra had two conductors, the Italian Arturo Toscanini, who had a reputation for preferring older, more established works in the classical repertoire and disdaining modern compositions, including those of Shostakovich. Leopold Stokowski was known for championing modern works, and he assumed he would conduct the new symphony. But Toscanini wanted this performance. He cited

his own background as an Italian anti-fascist and he appealed directly to Shostakovich who replied that he preferred Toscanini, and so it was Toscanini.

The orchestra performed the symphony in front of a live audience at NBC's Studio 8H, which in our time hosts the live broadcasts of the NBC television program *Saturday Night Live*. The symphony received its concert premiere at Tanglewood in Massachusetts a few weeks later. In the months that followed, orchestras across the US performed the symphony.

Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony was warmly received by the wartime American public. Critics were less enthusiastic. American composer Virgil Thomson (I need to talk about Virgil Thomson someday, don't I?) Virgil Thomson said of it: "It seems to have been written for the slow-witted, the not very musical, and the distracted." *Harper's Magazine* declared it was "definitely not the great symphonic work we were prepared to expect." *The Nation* called it "derivative" and "pretentious." After the war, and with the development of the Cold War, Americans increasingly dismissed the Seventh Symphony as mere Stalinist propaganda.

There are several versions of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony posted on YouTube. You can watch one of them and decide for yourself. Let me know what you think.

[music: Closing War Theme]