Few musicians have been as highly honored by the Soviet government as Dmitry Shostakovich. He was, it is true, the object of two savage campaigns of denunciation and vilification in the Soviet press, in 1936 and 1948, but in the intervening years he was quite regularly awarded Stalin and Lenin prizes; served on Soviet delegations to various peace congresses; and was appointed a People’s Artist of the Soviet Union in 1954, one year after Stalin’s death. He joined the Communist Party in 1960. He was elected a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. He frequently issued statements in support of his government’s policies. Then, at the end of his life, Shostakovich decided to speak his mind. In a series of conversations with the young musicologist Solomon Volkov, the composer expressed his uncensored views on musical, personal, and political matters. What emerges is a life dominated by fear for personal survival and by loathing for the system that honored the composer and which he had no choice but to serve.

The music of Shostakovich meant a great deal to me for a few years during the second decade of my life. I first heard it as a ballet, Léonide Massine’s lovely Rouge et noir, choreographed to Shostakovich’s First Symphony. That gripping, youthful work, together with certain portions of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Symphonies, is the only music of Shostakovich that is still attractive to me today. In 1942 I was present at the Los Angeles premiere of Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony. Leopold Stokowski conducted, Nelson Eddy sang “The United Nations Song” by Shostakovich, and a Soviet woman sniper, famous because she had personally shot seventeen Germans, made an impassioned plea for the opening of the second front. Leningrad was under siege. There was a portrait of Shostakovich in his air-raid-warden gear on the cover of Time. Our press

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1 Review of Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich; As Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). Originally published in Nation, 24 November 1979, 533–36.
and Hollywood films kept assuring us that our valiant allies, the Soviet people, were united in their love for their all-wise and benevolent leader, Joseph Stalin. To doubt the artistic worth of Shostakovich’s Seventh was tantamount to supporting Hitler. An elderly man who was heard muttering in the lobby that it was a trashy piece was almost lynched.

Listening to the Seventh on the radio recently, I marveled at the wishful illusions that accompanied its initial reception. That marching episode in the first movement—a phrase from The Merry Widow arranged and orchestrated in the manner of Ravel’s Boléro—how fresh it sounded, how eagerly it was accepted as the new word in music. I recognized those same illusions in the whitewashing of the American cult of Stalin in the film The Way We Were a few years ago. The Barbra Streisand character had a picture of Lenin on her wall and she was shown as nobly striving to save women and children from being killed in Spain. In real life in those days, the portrait would have been that of Stalin, and her energies would have been devoted to discrediting Trotsky and to accusing anyone who dared mention the postcollectivization famine in the Soviet Union or Stalin’s concentration camps of fascism. That was the way we of that generation, the film heroine’s and mine, really were.

There is no escaping the fact that the wild success of Shostakovich’s music in the West in the 1940s, especially among many people not otherwise noted for their interest in serious music, was due to the wartime alliance and the concomitant uncritical enthusiasm for everything Soviet, including Stalin. In light of the revelations of Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, this is ironic. The figure of Stalin looms as the single biggest presence in the book, a murderous deity at once insane and infantile, poisoning the air people breathe by his existence, reducing everyone to quivering jelly, constantly demanding homage and human sacrifices.

Shostakovich came face to face with the full power of Stalin’s displeasure during the purges of the 1930s. Nationally prominent figures close to him, such as Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky and the legendary stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold, were framed for nonexistent crimes and destroyed with no protest from any quarter. Millions of others perished for no reason at all. Shostakovich himself narrowly escaped with his life after Stalin ordered a press campaign against his hugely successful opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District. He survived by abasing himself,
pleading guilty, and composing his Fifth Symphony in the officially approved “realistic” manner (which in practice amounted to imitating the clichés of nineteenth-century Romanticism).

Twelve years later, the internationally famous composer of the Seventh Symphony seemed to be headed for the executioner’s block once again when he, Sergei Prokofiev, and several other Soviet composers were accused of “cosmopolitanism” (i.e., of not being chauvinistically patriotic in their music). This time round he escaped annihilation through Stalin’s fortuitous whim of sending him as the Soviet delegate to the Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City in 1949. There is a photograph in the book of Shostakovich flanked at that conference by the youthful Norman Mailer and Arthur Miller, the very image of the hands-across-the-sea amity of the artists of two peace-loving, democratic peoples. It is only now that we learn of Shostakovich’s shame and disgust at the hypocritical charade he was forced to enact.

His two major ordeals left Shostakovich demoralized and frightened for the rest of his life. He was willing to sign any statement, make any speech the authorities prepared for him, tailor his music to any specifications. It is one of the great achievements of the volume of memoirs to show how an artist of this stature can be brought to such a pass. The keynote of the book is the composer’s impotent rage. The Soviet rulers are “sick people” who feel that “they were called to set mankind,” or at least their country, “on the right path.” But the internal opponents of the Soviet regime are also treated with scorn, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for his messianism and supposed religious fanaticism and Andrei Sakharov for his contribution to the construction of the hydrogen bomb, which, in Shostakovich’s judgment, deprives him of any right to speak out on moral matters.

Here is how Shostakovich sees life under Communism: “It’s a huge ant hill in which we all crawl. In the majority of cases, our destinies are bad. We are treated harshly and cruelly. And as soon as someone crawls a little higher, he’s ready to torture and humiliate others.” His strongest contempt is reserved, understandably enough, for foreign “humanitarians” (mistranslated as “humanists” in the book) such as George Bernard Shaw, Romain Rolland, and Paul Robeson, who visited the Soviet Union during Stalin’s rule and then wrote glowing accounts of the free and prosperous
life they observed. “Once I was tormented by the question: Why?” says Shostakovich. “Why? Why were these people lying to the entire world? Why don’t these famous humanitarians give a damn about us, our lives, honor, and dignity?”

The answer for him is that “their cozy life as famous humanitarians is what they hold most dear.” Digging up the true facts of Soviet life is an ungrateful business: “You have to get involved, you have to write letters. And if you write a protest you won’t get invited the next time and they’ll ruin your good name. The radio and papers will smear you with dirt, they’ll call you a reactionary.” Shostakovich was well aware that Stalin’s one-time Western supporters (and their biographers) had tended in recent years to exercise selective forgetfulness about their earlier fellow-traveling.

Shostakovich’s embittered view of his life and his country left him with a residue of hatred which is at times directed at some unexpected targets. Arturo Toscanini, who did so much to win Shostakovich his popularity abroad, is denounced as a terrible conductor and a musical dictator comparable to Stalin. Prokofiev “had the soul of a goose, he always had a chip on his shoulder,” and he is said to have hired others to orchestrate his work. Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose poetry Shostakovich admired and for whose comedy, The Bedbug, he composed the incidental music, is described as a boor, a snob, and a toady. The tone in which Shostakovich speaks of these artists and also of the Soviet political establishment is a mixture of revulsion, sarcasm, and forced humor, a mixture reminiscent of the musical style of his opera The Nose. This is a book that one cannot read without wincing.

Aside from Meyerhold, Tukhachevsky, and the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko (who was persecuted by the Soviet authorities far more grimly than Shostakovich ever was), the person of whom the composer speaks with the greatest admiration and affection is his teacher, Aleksandr Glazunov. Regarded by most people as a secondary figure in the history of Russian music, Glazunov is for Shostakovich a “great musician.” The impression left by the several sections devoted to Glazunov in the book is that Shostakovich not only loved the alcoholic and syphilitic old composer but envied him for having lived and worked before the Revolution. “He composed when he really wanted to, for his own pleasure, without giving a thought to ‘ideological content [of his music].’” Glazunov enjoyed
the patronage of wealthy publishers and merchant millionaires, who, says Shostakovich, “are always more generous than the state.” When things got uncomfortable for him in Soviet times, Glazunov managed to defect during a visit to Vienna. He died peacefully in Paris in 1936, safe from ideological harassment.

In view of the extreme interest of the memoirs and the many startling and debatable revelations they contain, it is a pity that the book comes to us with so many unresolved questions in matters of authorship and veracity. Because of Solomon Volkov’s musicological expertise and well-documented closeness to Shostakovich, there is no reason to doubt that he actually wrote down what Shostakovich told him. One is perplexed, nonetheless, to read two pages on Igor Stravinsky which are a verbatim reproduction of a statement by Shostakovich published in the Soviet Union in 1973 in a collection of essays on Stravinsky edited by Boris Yarutovsky. Beginning identically, the texts in Testimony and in the collection of essays then diverge and go their separate ways. Similarly, the section on Mayakovskiy is almost identical with Shostakovich’s brief memoir of him published in Mayakovskiy as Remembered by His Contemporaries (Moscow, 1963), except that the passages depicting the cordial contacts between the poet and the composer have been replaced in Testimony by memories of hostility and rudeness.

It would have been far more comfortable for everyone involved if Volkov had been listed as the author of the book instead of its editor, and had chosen the format of “conversations with …” in the manner of J. P. Eckermann’s classic Conversations with Goethe at the End of His Life or Aleksandr Gladkov’s recent volume of conversations with Boris Pasternak. Another major problem is that Volkov fails to annotate for the benefit of Western readers those passages where Shostakovich makes statements that are contrary to known facts. Thus, he blames Stalin’s persecution of the writer Zoshchenko on Stalin’s supposed envy of Zoshchenko’s fame and popularity abroad. But Zoshchenko’s work is practically untranslatable and, outside the Soviet Union, he never had any reputation to speak

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2 Alexander Konstantinovich Gladkov, Meetings with Pasternak: A Memoir, ed. Max Hayward (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). This book remained unpublished in the original Russian until 2002. (Volkov’s Testimony has never appeared in Russian.)—Ed.
of. The actual causes and circumstances of his persecution are on record in several Western histories of Soviet literature.

If Stravinsky treated the Soviet musicologist Yarustovsky with contempt and refused to shake his hand, as Shostakovich says, how can we account for Stravinsky’s inviting Yarustovsky to his home in Hollywood and quoting his insights with approval in print? Worst of all is Shostakovich’s detailed account of the suicide in 1921 of the literary critic Anastasiya Chebotarevskaya, the wife of the major Symbolist poet and novelist Fyodor Sologub. As we know from numerous memoirs, she killed herself because of the inhuman cat-and-mouse game that Lenin’s government was playing with her and her husband by first granting them an exit visa and then withdrawing it. Shostakovich attributes her suicide to a trivial spat with her husband and describes Sologub’s despair in the wake of his loss in an insensitive, jeering tone that reduces a tragedy to ridiculous farce. The reader deserves at least a footnote stating the actual facts.

An additional handicap with which the book is saddled is the English translation. It can only be described as crude and occasionally semiliterate. On the one hand there is a profusion of anachronistic American slang which cannot possibly correspond to anything in Shostakovich’s Russian: “beat the hell out of it,” “those bums,” “I don’t want to be full of hot air.” On the other hand, there is wholesale literal transposition of Russian idioms into English with no regard to what this does to the reader’s comprehension. The Russian word for “power” (vlast’) can also be used to mean “government” or “system.” The Russian words for “creativity” and “creative” more usually designate “art” and “artistic.” Although these correspondences do not exist in English, the translator assumes they do and so we get “progressive realistic creativity” where “progressive realistic art” is meant, or “It’s not enough to love Soviet power. It has to love you” where “Soviet power” stands for “Soviet Government.” (Prospective readers are hereby advised to change “creativity” to “art” and “power” to “government” or “system” throughout the book, if they want to get at the meaning of the passages where these words occur.)

Western commentators have often been puzzled when Soviet persecution of artists is brought up, and they still seldom realize just what is involved. Reporting on the campaign against Soviet composers in his column in the New York Herald Tribune in 1948, Virgil Thomson found the whole business distasteful, but logical and reasonable, because the
composers themselves “have determined their own ideal and accepted … the principles” under which they were being censured.\(^3\) Another American music critic whom I admire, Peter Yates, describing Soviet composers’ difficulties with their government in his book *Twentieth Century Music* (1967), pointed out that they are also given great privileges by the authorities and compared this to the plight of American composers, left to the mercies of commercialism. “So long as the officially endorsed attitude that music is a commercial product sold for entertainment persists in America,” Yates concluded, “we have no better cause than the Russians to boast of ‘freedom of the arts.’”\(^4\)

I find such obligatory “comparison of oppressions,” which is more popular today than ever, sadly uninformed. Shostakovich’s pretending that his Fifth Symphony was a glorification of Socialist labor, when he in fact composed it as a memorial to the victims of Stalin’s terror, or that the march in the Seventh represented advancing German troops, while he actually thought of his own Soviet leaders during its composition, is living a lie of such magnitude that few in the West can imagine it, let alone experience it. *Testimony* is one continuous illustration of Boris Pasternak’s observation in *Doctor Zhivago* that people cannot be required to falsify their feelings day after day, to extol what they dislike and to feign joy about things that bring them misfortune, without sustaining serious physical and mental damage. A lifetime of pretense and hypocrisy on this scale cannot be understood by those who have not observed the Soviet system from within. The book should be required reading for those of us who think that Soviet dancers defect to the West only to get better roles and salaries.

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In terms of sheer impact, this review of Solomon Volkov’s notorious bestseller of 1979 was unquestionably SK’s musical chef d’oeuvre, and this despite the fact that among his writings none stands in greater need today of contextualization and reconsideration. In the official memorial resolution commissioned

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\(^3\) Virgil Thomson, “Composers in Trouble,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 February 1948; repr. in Virgil Thomson, *Music Reviewed 1940–1954* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 243.

\(^4\) Peter Yates, *Twentieth Century Music: Its Evolution from the End of the Harmonic Era into the Present Era of Sound* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 127.
by the University of California following SK’s death in 2009, we called this remarkable piece “the butterfly’s wing-beat that set off a thunderstorm in the form of the ‘Shostakovich wars’ that raged for decades.” The amazing thing about it is that, like many of us at the time, SK basically accepted the authenticity and veracity of the book on first impression, which (and this is something that the book’s inveterate, and now victorious, debunkers often forget) was truly powerful. As SK wrote, no one could read this book without wincing. He paraphrased some of its wince-making—and news-making—contents, and closed with a peroration that more eloquently than any other conveys why the book was at first received so willingly and seemed so important.

But SK’s review also contained a pair of paragraphs that effectively sealed Testimony’s fate. He noted two places where the new book reproduced passages he remembered from others that he’d read (one of them being the volume of Stat’i i materialy about Stravinsky that he had previously reviewed for Slavic Review in an essay, “The Repatriation of Igor Stravinsky,” which is also included in the present book), and he remarked, in a passage that has echoed endlessly in the literature about Shostakovich, that Volkov should have cast himself, rather than Shostakovich, as the book’s author. SK was the first to enunciate this now elementary stricture.

As most readers of these lines must know, Testimony has been conclusively exposed as a fabrication. The one who gets most of the credit for proving this, and rightly so, is Laurel Fay, who has been subjected by the book’s defenders to a campaign of vilification that begins to rival the ones that took place decades ago in Stalin’s Russia, or the ones SK describes in this very piece with respect to Western miscreants who learned, to their cost, that (as he says), digging up the true facts of Soviet life is—or was—an ungrateful business.

In an interview with a Canadian journalist that was first published in 2000 in Lingua Franca, the old academic gossip rag, Fay recalled that she first approached Volkov’s book “with great excitement and enthusiasm, and with no idea that it might not be authentic.” But, as her interlocutor reports:

> Shortly after she began reading Testimony, her attitude changed. “Something just didn’t feel right,” she says. “It was all just a little too convenient, both in terms of the explanation of the genesis and the background and then in the actual text itself.” The tone also puzzled

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5 [http://universityofcalifornia.edu/senate/inmemoriam/simonkarlinsky.html](http://universityofcalifornia.edu/senate/inmemoriam/simonkarlinsky.html).
her. *Testimony* is filled with biting sarcasm, bitter recrimination, and gossipy asides. Apart from a warm tribute to his mentor, Alexander Glazunov, Shostakovich says nothing about his life’s happy moments and expresses little gratitude. And why would Shostakovich, a devoted father and husband, recklessly endanger his family by agreeing to publish such a frontal attack on the Soviet system?

But there was something even more troubling. “I began to realize that I’d read some of this material before,” Fay says, although at first she could not identify where. The breakthrough came in November 1979, when Simon Karlinsky published a review of *Testimony* in the *Nation*. Karlinsky noted that two substantial passages in *Testimony*—a book said to derive entirely from interviews with the composer—had already appeared in print under Shostakovich’s name in Soviet publications. “Then it all began to click for me,” Fay says, “and it didn’t take me very long then to find another five passages.”

Since then, Fay has identified one more passage reproduced from the Soviet press, so that the beginnings of every one of the eight chapters in the book—the very pages Shostakovich signed as evidence of their authenticity—have all been exposed as recyclings. It is obvious to all except Volkov’s “useful idiots” (as Lenin would have said) that the whole process of authentication had been a sham, and that the first and most important victim of Volkov’s chicanery was Shostakovich himself.

The point to emphasize with regard to SK’s contribution to its exposure is that his commitment to advance the cause of truth took precedence over his commitment to uphold the actual contents of the book, even though he had found the book persuasive and inspiring, and wished to promote it. He was the single reader erudite enough to spot Volkov’s recyclings without prompting or special research; and then he was the first reader to raise what proved to be fatal doubts about the book’s provenance. Without him, Laurel Fay would not have been able to get started on what proved to be a grandly successful debunking. SK’s review, in conjunction with Fay’s interview, should be, as he says, required reading for all who think that disinterested commit-

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6 Paul Mitchinson, “The Shostakovich Variations (2000),” *Lingua franca* 10, no. 4 (May/June 2000): 46–54; repr. in Malcolm H. Brown, ed., *A Shostakovich Casebook* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 303–24; citation on p. 307.
7 See Laurel Fay, “Volkov’s *Testimony* Reconsidered,” in Brown, *Shostakovich Casebook*, 22–67.
ment to scholarly standards is a chimera. Although, as we’ve seen, SK could be as playful as any Postmodernist, when it mattered no one was ever a sturdier pillar of rectitude.

His review of Testimony did not go without challenge from readers of the Nation, which is not surprising in view of that magazine’s history as a former Stalinist redoubt. A reader named Leonard Boyer wrote in (9 February 1980) to counter the claims of Volkov’s book by upholding the veracity of the older view of Shostakovich, which he supported by quoting from official Soviet documents, and from Western news accounts from the time of the War. His other tactic was to impugn the objectivity of émigrés from Soviet Russia, like Solomon Volkov. The letter ends with an exhortation to SK to “remove his cold-war goggles; they’re frosted over.” Here is the relevant portion of SK’s answer, printed in the same issue of the Nation:

Leonard Boyer believes that the statements attributed to Dmitry Shostakovich in press releases and concert programs dating from the 1940s represented the composer’s true feelings. Back in the 1940s I might have agreed with him. Since that time I have met too many people who experienced Soviet life under Stalin and I have read too many eyewitness accounts of that period’s repression to accept at face value such homilies, usually extracted under duress. As my review made clear, I do have problems with the total veracity of Solomon Volkov’s book. But not because of the fact that the author has left the Soviet Union. Beginning with the earliest refugees from the October Revolution and all the way to today’s Vietnamese boat people, the testimony of those who experienced the inhumanity of and enslavement by the so-called Socialist regimes and then fled has been discounted as “not objective” by people like Boyer—no matter how many millions have risked their lives and suffered privations to escape Socialism. If this persistent disregard of human suffering isn’t a form of wearing goggles, I don’t know what is.