

# Russian Composer Dimitri Shostakovich & Leningrad Symphony Persona Non Grata in America

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Global Research, May 04, 2023

Region: [Russia and FSU, USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Update as of May 8, 2023 at 2:20 AM ET:

Added a Preface and changed the title.

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## *Preface*

*The best of all ways for humanity to begin to heal the massive amounts of evil hatred, malevolent rage, unchecked violence, cancerous suspicions, and an all but total collapse of trust between the warring parties that the war in Ukraine has created and continues to foster, is to re-assert the supreme dominance of the human spirit through the higher plane and world of entertainment. To once more elevate the rich heritage and cultures of human existence through those gifted ones in the arts who have spent their entire lives developing and honing their God-given, or, if one prefers, their Creation-given, talents to showcase to the highest humanly levels possible the majesty of that rich heritage.*

The supreme goal is to bring the war in Ukraine to some mutually-agreed upon conclusion before it further deteriorates into some dreaded nuclear or biological warfare conclusion. The answer isn't for America and NATO to weaponize the arts and world of entertainment, as the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and Metropolitan Opera now has done by essentially blackballing the musical creations of the brilliant Russian composer Dimitri

Shostakovich, his critically-important historic Leningrad Symphony, as well as the host of dedicated and highly-skilled Russian performers adversely affected by this blackballing, that has now allowed those same evil forces afoot in the world to continue to create so much hatred, rage, violence and suspicion by using the world of entertainment as an ideological bludgeon to punish whatever warring parties.

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The latest unseemly chapter in the collective West's ugly saga of military and cultural propaganda warfare in Ukraine, and the psychotic hysteria that continues to be waged upon the world's populace against all things Russian has taken yet another ignorant, anti-intellectual, anti-humanist, cruel twist. As one critic noted, "It is but further evidence of the collective psychosis the entire world continues to suffer because of the West's unflinching propaganda."

It is particularly sad that the *casus belli*, of all things, should be Shostakovich's LENINGRAD Symphony (No 10) that was composed during WWII in votive honor of the millions of civilians and brave Russian soldiers who died during the 900-day siege of Leningrad (Now Saint Petersburg).

The unending pressures levied by neo-conservative elements in the U.S., Canadian, Western European governments and corporate news conglomerates continues to attempt to erase from the public's awareness anything to do about WWII history, especially the titanic struggles by the Russians on the Eastern Front and the heroic part they played in that struggle, and especially post WWII Cold War History; the story of which is embodied in the Siege of Leningrad. Their efforts reflect badly, as well, on the true story of modern-day Ukrainian Banderist neo-Nazi's and other ultra-nationalists who still hold disproportionate influence in Ukraine and around the world in the perception of 21<sup>st</sup> century sentiments that continue to enflame neo-fascist sentiments.

Recently, to their absolute disgrace, the leaders of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera, entered into the propaganda war as cultural collaborators against anything to do with Russian involvement in the war, by banning and suppressing the formerly-scheduled upcoming May performance of Dimitri Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony*; which the Philharmonic Orchestra and Metropolitan Opera attempt to spin, not as a collaboration with modern-day anti Russian Neo-Nazism but as a twisted expression of humanist sentiment. Their current suppression of the LENINGRAD Symphony borders upon psychotic hysteria; its related decision to also forgo the appearance of the world-renowned soprano Anna Netrebko, at face value, seems an additional twisted, perverse expression of such humanism.

Fred Mazelis, who ran for Mayor of New York in 1989, and was a 3<sup>rd</sup> Party candidate for Vice-President of the United States, with presidential running mates Helen Halyard in 1992 and Jerome White in 1996, representing the Socialist Equality Party, has in recent days called attention to the New York Philharmonic Orchestra's quiet announcement of a complete change in the program for its May 10-12 performance at its newly-renovated Geffen Hall at New York's Lincoln Center arts complex.

Russian conductor Tugan Sokhiev was originally scheduled to lead the famous Leningrad Symphony by Dmitri Shostakovich. But the New York Philharmonic Orchestra has now

quietly cancelled the performance and Tugan Sokhiev will not be on the podium; to be replaced by James Gaffigan and a performance of a work instead by the Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov, along with Prokofiev's Third Symphony and Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto.

Fred Marzelis notes, "Yet, only a few months ago, the Philharmonic box office was still selling tickets for the May concerts that were clearly marked "Leningrad Symphony." Marzelis goes on to say, "At some point this was changed, although not all ticket holders were even informed."

When asked about the change, the orchestra's press office first cited "artistic decisions." A day later, it was attributed to "scheduling conflicts." A look at Sokhiev's upcoming concert schedule reveals, in fact, that he is scheduled to be leading the Munich Philharmonic on those dates. But clearly more than a scheduling conflict is involved."

Until last year, Sokhiev was the music director and principal conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, which he had led since 2014, and also the music director of the *Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse* in France, a post he assumed in 2008. One year ago, he was scheduled to conduct a program of music by Russian composers in New York, an appearance that was suddenly cancelled about a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The orchestra issued a press release explaining that, "out of regard for the current global situation," Sokhiev would not lead the program. The decision was said to be a mutual one, but, as the global news site World Socialist Web (WSWS) pointed out at the time, Sokhiev likely had little choice in the matter. At the same time, last year's press release announced that the Philharmonic "very much looks forward to welcoming him [Sokhiev] next season."

But, as the World Socialist Global Web site also now points out, "Well, next season is clearly here, and the "current global situation," a euphemism for the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine, is continuing, with various NATO members calling for its escalation. This is the likely reason for the "scheduling conflict" that has suddenly appeared."

The WSWS last year called the cancellation of Sokhiev's appearance "giving in to anti-Russian prejudice," and the same would seem to apply one year later. This time the Philharmonic has not issued a press release, nor is it promising an appearance in the future. The page on the orchestra's website devoted to Sokhiev simply states, "NO CONCERTS" both for the 2022-23 season (the second consecutive year his appearances have been cancelled) and for the 2023-24 season."

The WSWS goes on to report, "Philharmonic chief executive Deborah Borda, while denying any ban on Russian music, was quoted last year as saying there could be "*no blanket decisions* about performances by Russian musicians with the orchestra". Whatever the Philharmonic officials may say, their action on the Leningrad Symphony, and their failure to announce any future date for its performance, can only be taken as a continuation and ever-deepening, broader anti-Russian propaganda campaign.

Sokhiev joins a list of others who have either been openly banned or more quietly shelved in the music world and performing arts. Prominent artists like soprano Anna Netrebko, bass Ildar Abdrazakov and conductor Valery Gergiev have been blackballed. New York City's Metropolitan Opera has led the way, banning Netrebko and Gergiev last year.

In recent days, further word has arrived of yet new cancellations. Belarusian mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Semenchuk, who was announced as part of the cast of next season's new production of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* at the Met, has been removed, according to a report on the *Opera Wire* website. The website explains that Semenchuk recently performed several times at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg, and those appearances were apparently sufficient reason for the Met to change its plans. Semenchuk, like other Russian and Belarusian performers, still has dates in Europe. Semenchuk's schedule includes appearances with the *Bayerische Staatsopera* in Munich and also at La Scala in Milan.

Another casualty of the anti-Russian campaign, declares the WSWS, is Russian-German soprano Anastasiya Taratorkina. The Queen Sonja Competition in Norway has eliminated her because she has both German and Russian passports, even though she has lived in Germany for many years.

Opera Wire reports on an email it received from the soprano. Quoting from a communication from the Competition, it explains, "This year's regulations do not allow participants with Russian or Belarusian citizenship, which unfortunately means that you are disqualified even though you also have a German passport. We will of course reimburse your paid application fee and hope that the situation changes so we may welcome you to apply for the next competition."

The more extremist among Ukrainian nationalists and their supporters have called not only for the banning of Russian performers, but also the music of Russian composers. Following a strong backlash on this issue, however, there have been US performances of Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and others. In fact, Sokhiev himself led the Philadelphia Orchestra in February in an all-Russian program, including works by Borodin and Prokofiev, in addition to Tchaikovsky.

The New York Philharmonic has not scheduled Sokhiev, however. The Philharmonic, as the World Socialist Web site pointed out last year, "may not be directly inspiring the anti-Russian campaign, but it is clearly transmitting it, and its acquiescence amounts to the same thing." The orchestra management is very likely worried about the effect that Ukrainian protests would have on its public image. When the Osnabruck Music Festival in northwest Germany performed the violin concerto of Ukrainian Silvestrov alongside the towering Eighth Symphony of Shostakovich, like the Leningrad Symphony composed during the war, the then-Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany denounced the event.

Sokhiev made a further lengthy statement on Facebook last year. For the Ukrainian far right and fascistic elements, the fact that he is Russian is reason enough for many to oppose his work. In some circles, he could perhaps "atone" for this fact by lining up sufficiently behind the Ukrainian regime. However, as WSWS has reported, "Sokhiev expressed dismay at having "to make a choice and choose one of my musical family over the other. I am being asked to choose one cultural tradition over the other. I am being asked to choose one artist over the other. I am being asked to choose one singer over the other. I will be soon asked to choose between Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy. It is already happening in Poland, [a] European country, where Russian music is forbidden."

The original presence of Shostakovich's 7th Symphony on the Philharmonic Orchestra and Metropolitan Opera's upcoming May 10-12 programs is of special importance within the context here of the ongoing unresolved war in Ukraine. They undoubtedly continue to infuriate the more frenzied advocates of the Ukrainian proxy war. Fred Mazelis and the

World Socialist Web contend that perhaps no work in the symphonic repertory angers Ukrainian nationalists as much, even though The New York Philharmonic, under its conductor Jaap van Zweden, last conducted Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony Played by a Starving Orchestra

The symphony was composed during the horrific German siege of Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), in which a million or more Soviet soldiers and civilians perished over a 28-month period that ended in January 1944. Shostakovich, who initially resisted orders to evacuate to the East for his own safety, completed the first three movements in Leningrad during the siege, which began in September 1941. The final movement was completed in Kuibyshev (now Samara), and the symphony was premiered in Moscow in March 1942. Most famously, it was performed in Leningrad during the siege, by an orchestra of 15 surviving, literally-starving, musicians, on August 9, 1942.

To know some of the details of this heroic performance it's essential to read the BBC's account of "*Shostakovich's Symphony Played by a Starving Orchestra*", and then try not to sob uncontrollably while attempting to fathom the cold, hard-heartedness that exists behind the Wars in Ukraine, and in America, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and Metropolitan Opera's, that could audaciously ban the performances of this historic symphony held in the bold human defiance of the monstrosity of war and hate. See [Shostakovich's symphony played by a starving orchestra - BBC News](#).

The symphony was named for the city of its birth and almost immediately became a symbol of the struggles and sacrifices of the Soviet people against the Nazi invaders. Twenty-seven million soldiers and civilians ultimately died in this struggle, the largest toll for any country in the Second World War. Many millions of Soviet workers distinguished between their defense of the remaining conquests of the October 1917 Revolution, and the much-hated Stalin regime.

Shostakovich's career and even his life were threatened during the years of the Stalinist Great Terror of the late 1930s. The composer came under renewed attack even after the war, during their struggles to defend the Soviet Union, in which Shostakovich and many others found renewed strength and purpose.

Those who fought in that war, and in so many cases gave their lives, included both Jews and non-Jews, Russians and Ukrainians, and many other nationalities. It is this fact of united struggle against the Nazis and their allies, particularly the Ukrainians led by the notorious Stepan Bandera, that the Ukrainian regime, in the midst of the current war, and Banderist supporters continue to evade and lie about. They seek to avoid answering the questions, "What were the Ukrainian nationalists, Banderites and open fascists doing in WWII while the Leningraders were under siege? Were many of them, and the Bandera Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in particular, directly assisting the Nazis or carrying out their own pogroms and murders of Ukrainian Jews? What were those pogroms?"

Tellingly, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra's executive Deborah Borda was quoted last year as saying there could be "no blanket decision" made about performances by Russian musicians with the orchestra".

However, the decision they have made in this current instance on the Leningrad Symphony

and their avoidance to announce any future date for its performance can only be interpreted as a further deepening in the future of a broader, ever more-concerted, anti-Russian propaganda campaign in the United States and abroad among others of its allies.

The actions by leaders of the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera, who apparently seek to suppress the performance of Shostakovich's Leningrad Symphony for whatever reasons, can only be perceived as the twisted, perverse expression that it is of the extent to how far the war in Ukraine has contaminated and stifled human thoughts throughout the world – in the arts, music, literature, dance, theatre, intellectual debate that continues to pollute the minds and thoughts of the entire world.

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*The writer Jerome Irwin is a Canadian-American writer who originally was a Criminology student working in one of America's local police departments. For decades, Irwin has sought to call world attention to problems of environmental degradation and unsustainability caused by a host of environmental-ecological-spiritual issues that exist between the conflicting world philosophies of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.*

*Irwin is the author of the book, "The Wild Gentle Ones; A Turtle Island Odyssey" ([www.turtle-island-odyssey.com](http://www.turtle-island-odyssey.com)), a spiritual odyssey among the native peoples of North America that has led to numerous articles pertaining to: Ireland's Fenian Movement; native peoples Dakota Access Pipeline Resistance Movement; AIPAC, Israel & the U.S. Congress anti-BDS Movement; the historic Battle for Palestine & Siege of Gaza, as well as; the many violations constantly being waged by industrial-corporate-military-propaganda interests against the World's Collective Soul. The author and his wife are long-time residents on the North Shore of British Columbia.*

*He is a regular contributor to Global Research.*

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