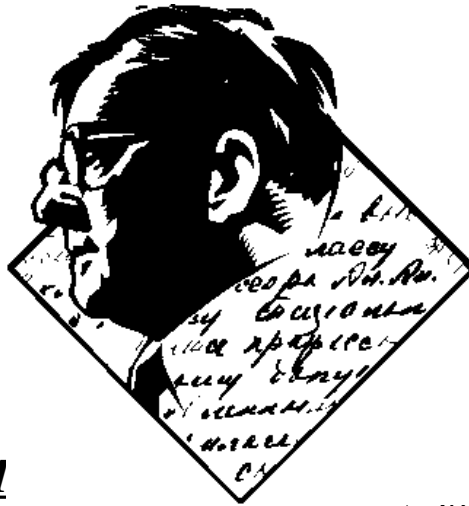


# WRITING ABOUT

# SHOSTAKOVICH



## **YOU MUST REMEMBER!**

### *Shostakovich's alleged interrogation by the NKVD in 1937*

*by Ian MacDonald*

The most remarkable story recently told in connection with Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony is composer Veniamin Basner's account (received from the composer) of Shostakovich's interrogation by an officer of the NKVD in 1937. This interrogation allegedly took place at the time of the mass-arrest of 80,000 Soviet military, including Shostakovich's protector Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky. In the second part of *Soviet Echoes*, Channel 4's 1995 documentary series on Soviet music, Basner (1925-1996) recalled "word for word" the composer's account of this interrogation:

"I was given a [security] pass and went to the [NKVD] office. The investigator got up when I came in and greeted me. He was very friendly and asked me to sit down. He started asking questions about my health, my family, the work I was doing—all kinds of questions. He spoke in a very friendly, welcoming and polite way. Then suddenly he asked me: 'So, tell me. Do you know Tukhachevsky?' I said yes, and he said 'How?'. So then I said: 'At one of my concerts. After the concert, Tukhachevsky came backstage to congratulate me. He said he liked my music, that he was an admirer. He said he'd like to meet me when he came to Leningrad to talk about music. He said it would be a pleasure to discuss music with me. He said if I came to Moscow he'd be happy to see me.'

"'And how often did you meet?' 'Only when Tukhachevsky came here. He usually invited me for dinner.'—'Who else was at the table?' 'Just his

family. His family and relatives.'—'And what did you discuss?' 'Mostly music.'—'Not politics?' 'No, we talked politics. I knew how things were.'—'Dmitri Dmitryevich, this is very serious. You must remember. Today is Saturday. I'll sign your pass and you can go home. But on Monday noon, you must be here. Don't forget now. This is very serious, very important.'

"I understood this was the end. Those two days until Monday were a nightmare. I told my wife I probably wouldn't return. She even prepared a bag for me—the kind prepared for people who were taken away. She put in warm underwear. She knew I wouldn't be back. I went back there at noon [on Monday] and reported to reception. There was a soldier there. I gave him my [internal] passport. I told him I'd been summoned. He looked for my name: first, second, third list. He said: 'Who summoned you?' I said: 'Inspector Zakovsky.' He said: 'He won't be able to see you today. Go home. We'll notify you.' He returned my passport and I went home. It was only later that evening that I learned that the inspector had been arrested."

Summing up, Basner commented: "That's how it was. But because of that we have Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony—and everything he wrote after that."

Basner's claim that he recalled Shostakovich's narrative "word for word" must be taken with a pinch of salt, if only because the version he gave to Elizabeth Wilson (*Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, pp. 123-5) departs from it in several details. There, the NKVD inspector's name appears as Zanchevsky; also the passage following the injunction "You must remember" (Wilson: "You must shake your memory") includes the words "It cannot be that you were at [Tukhachevsky's] home and that you did not talk about politics. For instance, the plot to assassinate Comrade Stalin? What did you hear about that?". Moreover in the Wilson version, Shostakovich is represented as refusing to answer further questions, which prompts the investiga-





tor to add that, by Monday, “you [Shostakovich] will without fail remember everything. You must recall every detail of the discussion regarding the plot against Stalin of which you were a witness.” This is an explicit threat that Shostakovich must “inform” on Tukhachevsky or face the consequences. (In other respects, Basner’s two versions of the story are more or less identical.)

Basner adds that the non-appearance of this story in *Testimony* leads him to believe that the book is “a falsified account”, since Shostakovich is certain to have included it in any complete memoir of his career around this time. There are, though, reasons to doubt this. Firstly, Shostakovich made no mention of this story to his close friend Isaak Glikman. Secondly, he did tell it to Krzysztof Meyer, who includes it in his biography of the composer (*Dimitri Chostakoviich*, Fayard 1994, p. 211); however, Meyer gives the name of the interrogating officer as Zakrevsky. It is understood that Solomon Volkov, too, was aware of the story while compiling *Testimony*, but that he did not trust its provenance, partly because the interrogating officer’s name changes from version to version. (The Commissioner of State Security in Leningrad for the period in question was Leonid Zakovsky, a colleague of Zhdanov who survived the fall of Yagoda but not of Yezhov. He directed the Terror in Leningrad throughout 1937 only to be arrested and shot in 1938. Clearly he cannot have been the officer in question.)

Stalin’s NKVD plot against Tukhachevsky was carefully planned. Supposing the composer’s story to be true, he might have been speculatively detained in late April when orders were going out to obtain “evidence” against Tukhachevsky. By mid-May, though, the mass-arrest of high-ranking officers was in full swing and, under torture, these men were providing all the “corroboration” the State Prosecutor could have needed. By the time it came to arresting Tukhachevsky himself, all niceties were dispensed with. Picked up on 26th or 27th May, he was interrogated by Yezhov in person and tortured severely enough to have “confessed” after only two days. In the aftermath of his closed trial and sum-

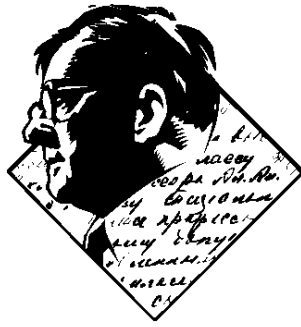
mary execution, one of his sisters and both his brothers were also shot. Three more sisters, two former wives, and his young daughter were sent to the camps. His wife Nina went mad. Even Tukhachevsky’s mother was done away with. If Shostakovich was directly entangled with this very nasty business in the way his interrogation story suggests, he was lucky to escape with his life, let alone to finish the Fifth Symphony.

Yet caution is advisable in this case. Tales like it (the feared arrest averted by the arrest of the interrogator) were part of Soviet folklore. This was not because such things didn’t happen; on the contrary, they often did. However, it seems extremely unlikely that a figure as prominent as Shostakovich could have been arrested on the sole initiative of an NKVD officer. With a high-profile person, such a thing would have been sanctioned and monitored at the highest level. For this reason, it is hard to see why such an operation would be aborted (a) so rapidly and (b) by arresting the officer charged with pursuing the interrogation. (There was a violent purge of the Communist Party in Leningrad in May 1937 and the local NKVD would have needed all the interrogators it could keep on its staff. The Terror only turned on the NKVD itself in a major way in 1938.)

If Shostakovich’s story of his interrogation is not to be taken at face value, nor is it to be dismissed as a wanton fiction. Several of his relatives and many of his colleagues were “purged” during this period. In 1936, his former companion Elena Konstantinovskaya and a family friend, the novelist Galina Serebryakova, were arrested. In 1937, his mother-in-law Sofia Varzar, uncle Maxim Kostrikin, and brother-in-law Vsevolod Frederiks were arrested, and his sister Maria exiled to Frunze. (Frederiks died in the Gulag.) Soon after Tukhachevsky was eliminated, the musicologist Nikolai Zhilyayev was arrested and executed. During 1938, Boris Kornilov, author of words to

“Song of the Meeting” from *Counterplan*, was arrested and later done away with, as was Adrian Piotrovsky, author of *Rule Britannia* and librettist of





*The Limpid Stream*. In 1939, Meyerhold was arrested, savagely tortured, and executed.

(See Vitaly Shentalinsky, *The KGB's Literary Archive*, Harvill, 1995.)

An intensely sensitive man, Shostakovich may have so feared his imminent arrest that he lost his ability to discriminate between what happened in fact and what only occurred in his tormented imagination. (This, again, was a common syndrome under the Terror.) Despite his presumably terrible fear after Tukhachevsky's arrest—a time when, as Maxim assures us, the composer sat up at night with a suitcase waiting for the NKVD to come for him—he still managed to go on composing the Fifth Symphony: specifically, the *Largo* and the *Finale*. (According to Grigori Fried, Shostakovich—on his way back to Leningrad from a journey to the south—brought the first two movements to

Zhilyayev's communal flat in Moscow soon after finishing them. Zhilyayev thought what he had seen

“quite wonderful”. If Shostakovich composed the *Largo* in June after Tukhachevsky's death, Zhilyayev, himself arrested around this time, could have seen no more of the score.)

Of the *Largo*, Israel Nestyev, often allied with Shostakovich's enemies in the Composers' Union, has recently said: “Even now I perceive this music as a requiem for the millions of innocent victims of Stalin's regime.” He also acknowledges Shostakovich's unique and heroic achievement: “Not a single other artist—no painter, dramatist, or film-maker—could think of using their art as a means of expressing protest against Stalin's Terror. Only instrumental music was able to express the terrible truth of that time.” Referring to the Fifth Symphony, the violist Fyodor Druzhinin of the Beethoven Quartet adds: “People who lived in Shostakovich's epoch have no need to dig in the archives or to marvel at the evidence of repressions and executions and murders. It is all there in his music.”

