

Review of Brian Moynahan's Leningrad: *Siege and Symphony*

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Brian Moynahan's book, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, vividly depicts the story of the great siege against the city of Leningrad during the second world war, and Shostakovich's accompanying Seventh Symphony, which put to music these horrifying events. Moynahan's skilled writing captures readers from their seats, and places them in the city of Leningrad to experience the fear, anger, starvation and dismay right along with the citizens of Leningrad. Moynahan has succeeded in creating a book that brings history and art to life.

What is especially impressive is Moynahan's incorporation of sources. His use of journals, detailed interrogation records, and direct quotes from victims, soldiers and witnesses of the war allows a glimpse into the minds of the people of the time, and their reaction to the terrifying events that surrounded their beloved city. Moynahan appeals to his reader by his meticulous attention to detail, but sometimes takes this attention a bit far. Too little detail in a book becomes a stale record of history, but too much and it becomes overexaggerated and distracting from the plot. Fortunately, Moynahan avoided the mundane, but he occasionally drifts across this fine line by frequently including irrelevant and repetitive material.

For example, Moynahan tells multiple stories about those who were affected by the terrors in Leningrad from the Soviet Union, particularly the intellectuals and nobles of the city. These short illustrations accentuated the horror and anxiety that Russians faced every day as they frantically walked the streets of Leningrad wondering who the next victims would be. Moynahan's inclusion of these many stories, though, soon became tedious and expected.

Each story begins with an intellectual or citizen of Leningrad and a brief description of their life or career. A brutal interrogation from the secret police soon follows, and the story ends with the victims' unreasonable execution. Understandably, Moynahan stresses the Soviets' excessive murders and horrifying regime, but for the sake of the narrative flow of the book, he might have eased his numerous accounts of execution details. Lisa Baglione, professor at St. Joseph university in Philadelphia in her review of Moynahan's work, states, "At times, his attention to the minutiae can be frustrating. Must we read yet another individual and her terrible end?" Of course, it would be distasteful to request a more cheerful account of the Soviet terror when the truth is far from favorable. However, Moynahan would have greater held the interest of his readers by inserting a numbered death toll that exemplified the fatalities rather than composing a story about each execution.

Additionally, Moynahan writes briefly of many artists and intellectuals within the first chapter, and later taxes the reader's memory by mentioning the names again during the book. This task proves to be difficult, however, as Moynahan describes multiple people in the span of a short paragraph and expects the reader to remember the names and their relations in Leningrad throughout the rest of the book. In her review of *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony*, Rebecca Reich notes, "The reader's trust is also tested by the repetition of quotations and the frequent misrendering of Russian words and names. The review from the *ARCS Journal* further emphasizes this unnecessary number of identities: "The wide array of names, places, and characters can easily get confusing to even the most seasoned Russianist." Thus, excluding various accounts would have improved the quality of the book.

Furthermore, Moynahan might have made a greater impact on the reader had he focused on a few individual stories rather than the story of the entire city. Although Shostakovich's story was frequently discussed, more time devoted to the composer and

his own experiences would likely have made a greater emotional impression on the reader. However, to fault Moynahan for expanding the scope of the book would be a mistake. The title of the book is, after all, Leningrad, not Shostakovich. The account was meant to include the entire city which involved the suffering and exaltation of all the people who overcame unimaginable struggle. Though the flow of the book would perhaps be clearer if written solely of the composer, it's obvious that it was not the author's intention to write a biography.

Moynahan's writing style keeps the reader engaged by switching between the narrative of the war, and the art scene in Leningrad by including various stories of artists and intellectuals. He often writes of the experiences of the soldiers in the trenches who witnessed the death of their friends, and whose army was growing weaker by the day. Trained soldiers were replaced by ordinary Leningrad citizens who were starving and ill equipped for war. The Germans were so close that they could mock the weak Russian army within ear shot and could differentiate the trained soldiers from the untrained citizens. Within the art scene in Leningrad, Moynahan adds snippets of theatrical actors who tried to lighten the mood of the emotionless army officers. On one occasion, this feat was accomplished by theatrical improv with an unexpected wandering goat. By tying both humanity and beauty with the ugly war, Moynahan achieves the challenging task of harmoniously combining good and evil in a way that truthfully narrates the battle while expressing the story behind the art that responded to the cruelties of the war.

While Shostakovich was - and remains - slightly mysterious in character, Moynahan heavily relies on accurate sources to portray the composer as clearly as possible, and refrains from making presumptions about the enigmatic composer. Many consider Shostakovich a soviet musician, but Moynahan emphasizes Shostakovich's reluctance towards the Soviet Union. Shostakovich was obligated to remain on good terms with Stalin's regime to keep himself and his family alive. Moynahan addresses the

complications of Shostakovich's 4th symphony which the composer was forced to scrap due to its "formalistic" tendencies. Moynahan presents Shostakovich not as a supporter of the Soviet Union, but as one who is hesitant to be in the spotlight and is desperate to survive.

Moynahan offers a unique perspective on World War II that is lesser known but demands to be told. The reader will gain insight on the War from both the Soviet side and the Nazi Germany army. His book provides the history of the city of Leningrad that has been inhumanely slaughtered by both the Soviets and the Germans. Estimated Russian deaths during Stalin's terror is 22,500. Starvation in Leningrad from the siege destroyed more than two thirds of the city, over 1.5 million people, making it one of the deadliest famines ever recorded in history.

Moynahan incorporates gruesome descriptions of the famine. The Leningrad citizens resorted to eating cats, dogs, books and paint along with many reports of cannibalism. People were quick to bury their loved ones, because others regularly ate freshly dead human flesh. Moynahan even writes of starving mothers who killed their own babies for food for themselves and their other children. Pets throughout the city were scarcely seen after the siege, and dead horses from the army were promptly butchered by citizens eager for a parcel of food. Moynahan describes the food portions Leningraders were each allotted, and he compares these portions to a normal nutritional intake demonstrating the enormous gap. Russian soldiers risked their lives in "No Man's Land" to retrieve food from dead Germans while Germans offered bread to Russian women in exchange for prostitution. Moynahan highlights the distress by quoting the pleas of Leningrad housewives, "we shall be glad if the bombs kill us... death from bombs or shells is no longer so terrible. The hunger we have is far worse." Moynahan has brought this horrific information to surface as he continually exposes the raw human condition and desperation that lies behind even the most dignified Leningrad elites.

Moynahan has assured that the lives of those perished in famine were not lived in vain. The misery and torture this innocent city faced will forever remain in the reader's memory.

Each account of hunger and anguish rises the reader's anticipation of the great performance of the seventh symphony that is to come. Every chapter hints to the performance, and the devastation that preludes it increases the intensity and excitement of the approaching concert. The impatient reader may eagerly await the performance in the last chapter, but Moynahan satisfies them with clues and fragments of the symphony's details dispersed in between the brutalities of the warzone.

Leningrad's deep cultural roots, history, and love for art is what helped them fight to keep their city alive until the end. Moynahan proficiently proves this thesis throughout his book. Despite constant bombing, bitter cold, starvation and death, the Leningraders still went to the symphony. They still participated in the art, theater, and culture that was vastly important to them. This devotion to art, perhaps, is what gave the people something to live for. It was a way for them to escape the horrors of their daily lives, and it gave them a reason to defend their city at all costs. Moynahan quotes the Leningrad trombonist who performed in the premiere, "We were stunned by the number who had turned out, some were in suits... most were emaciated. And we realized that these people were not just starving for food, but for music. We resolved to play the very best we could."

This commitment to culture is clearly portrayed when military officers with musical ability were given leave to play in the orchestra that was so desperate for living musicians. Likewise, the defense line was loaded to ensure a peaceful premiere of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony in the city it was dedicated to. Moynahan not only tells the story of the remarkable people of the past, but also inspires his readers to persevere and cling to the power of art in the future.

Though minor tangents and excess details occasionally distract Moynahan's focus, the book succeeds in its purpose to paint an authentic picture of Leningrad during WWII. It follows the account of the rich culture that overcame an intense battle along with the starvation of the citizens. Because of their resilience, they never surrendered their beloved city to the Germans, or lost faith during the Soviet terror. *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony* is the story of bravery, and hope for a beautiful and harmonious future.

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