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**Sinopsis**

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Fay, an academic specializing in Russian music, notes in her introduction to this careful and detailed study of the Soviet composer's life and work that "there is not a single even remotely reliable resource in Russian, English, or any other language for the basic facts" about him. She has therefore set herself dutifully to sort fact from tendentious politicizing as best she can. Whether from the "right" (a dutiful Soviet official biography) or the "left" (Solomon Volkov's highly suspect Testament, which suggested the composer was a closet rebel against state conformism all his life). Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975) was certainly the pre-eminent composer who lived his entire creative life under the Soviet regime (Prokofiev escaped to Paris for an extended period). As such, he became, perforce, a cultural icon, despite his occasional fallings from grace with the Kremlin. One of the virtues of Fay's book is her picture of the endless mundane tasks to which Shostakovich was subjected: rote speeches, statements, interviews, appearances at conferences. In many ways his life was that of a senior civil servant, a role he performed with extraordinary conscientiousness. As a personality, however, he remains profoundly elusive. Fay reports that Shostakovich was frequently witty and sardonic, but gives few glimpses of this side of him. More importantly, it is never explained whether his apparent equivocations about deplorable aspects of Soviet artistic policy sprang from cowardice or cynicism. What is certain was that this enormously prolific, hard-working artist left behind a legacy of powerful, often agonizingly somber, work that is even more striking considering the circumstances. A often feeble health, worries about money and personal security. Under which he wrote. Fay has done a notable job of clearing the brush; a more substantial and penetrating portrait remains to be constructed on that cleared site.