Citizen Countess: Sofia Panina and the Fate of Revolutionary Russia

Adele Lindenmeyr
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Sofia Panina’s life was full of interesting intersections. A countess born into wealth, she became a popular political figure, only to run afoul of the Bolshevik government. Adele Lindenmeyr’s biography of Sofia Panina, Citizen Countess, focuses on how Panina was often torn between competing forces.

In her childhood, Panina’s grandmother made an effort to separate Panina and her inherited fortune from her politically active mother, educating her at a top boarding school. Her education and connections led her to open the Ligovsky People’s House, the hub for various charity efforts on behalf of the working class, from promoting education to fighting prostitution.

That work brought Panina into political circles. As socialist and liberal groups held meetings and rallies at the People’s House, she earned the nickname “The Red Countess” for her opposition to the tsar. After the February Revolution toppled the monarchy and aristocracy, Panina was a logical candidate for political office. Appointed to the center-left Kadet Party’s central committee, she soon became the first woman in history—Russian or otherwise—to serve as a cabinet minister.

But Panina’s high profile and efforts to keep the provisional government going made her a target of the Bolshevik coup. The most gripping parts of the book cover Panina’s arrest and trial, in which the countess’s own accounts and dialogue from the courtroom illustrate the precariousness of her position. Even those sympathetic to her were willing to treat her as collateral damage for the revolution. Still, her reputation meant that she received minor punishment and was able to flee abroad.

Along with copious research, Lindenmeyr makes good use of Panina’s writings in exile to help tell her important story. Citizen Countess is a valuable biography about a woman who embodied the divides of revolutionary Russia.

JEFF FLEISCHER (November / December 2019)

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