

**Pamela A. Jordan, *Stalin's Singing Spy: The Life and Exile of Nadezhda Plevitskaya*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. xi, 365 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth.**

Reviewed by: Alison Rowley, Concordia University, Montreal

In September 1941, Nadezhda Plevitskaya, one of Emperor Nicholas II's favorite singers, died in a prison infirmary in France. Almost two years earlier she had been branded a Soviet agent and convicted of complicity in the kidnapping of White General Evgeny Miller. The contradictions that can be seen in these two sentences are at the root of Pamela Jordan's excellent biography of the singer. In it, Jordan traces how Plevitskaya rose from an obscure village girl to become a famous pre-revolutionary folk singer; how that fame endured for decades as she remained a cultural force among Russian émigrés after the revolution; and how the NKVD recruited Plevitskaya, as well as her third husband Nikolai Skoblin, in 1930.

Plevitskaya was born into a large peasant family in the village of Vinnikovo, 20 miles from Kursk, in 1879. Groomed to become an ideal peasant wife by her mother, Plevitskaya fought hard to attend the local school over the latter's strenuous objections. In the end, she obtained only two and a half years of formal education before she briefly entered a convent in order to avoid marrying a boy from her village. At 16, Plevitskaya left the convent and was adrift. A fortuitous moment came when she went to the circus with her sister: she wound up joining the troupe. During the next decade Plevitskaya married for the first time and performed in a series of variety shows. She gradually crafted a public persona that built on a sentimentalized view of the peasantry, and her reputation as a folk singer grew. In 1909 she moved to Moscow, signed a contract with Yar Restaurant, and made some of her first sound recordings.

The years that followed were golden ones for Plevitskaya as her career took off. She sang in bigger and bigger venues, made more recordings, and, in March 1910, performed for the Tsar for the first time. With career success came material rewards. In 1911, Plevitskaya could afford to build a lavish dacha in her home village. The following year her marriage ended, but a new romantic entanglement soon followed. Plevitskaya's fiancé was mobilized at the start of the Great War, and she volunteered as a nurse so she could stay close to him. She also sang for patients and army units near the front. She returned to Petrograd only after her fiancé died in January 1915.

Like millions of others, Plevitskaya's life was destabilized by the Russian Revolution and the civil war. Jordan is to be commended for tracking down as much information as possible about Plevitskaya's life in these turbulent years, and for explaining instances when stories about her actions might not be true. In November 1917, Plevitskaya married Yuri Levitsky in her village church and her fortunes joined those of her much younger husband. Levitsky was a White officer who switched sides in 1918. At that point, Plevitskaya began to sing for Red forces in Kursk and Odessa. The following year, the couple was captured by General Anton Denikin's Volunteer Army, so Levitsky switched sides again. Despite eventually separating from her husband, Plevitskaya stayed near White units and occasionally performed for them. In 1920 she was trapped on the Crimean Peninsula. While volunteering in a hospital, she met Nikolai

Skoblin, whom she eventually married in June 1921. Stripped of her citizenship by the new Bolshevik government (which also confiscated her properties), Plevitskaya was forced into emigration.

The 1920s were rather nomadic years for Plevitskaya and Skoblin. Skoblin's status as a White officer did not guarantee the couple much in the way of income; hence, Plevitskaya was the primary breadwinner. She toured the European continent, performing regularly wherever there were large Russian émigré communities. France was her home base, although Plevitskaya never became a French citizen. Instead, like so many Russians in exile, Plevitskaya was desperate to retain her Russian identity and preserve the culture that had made her a celebrity. In the 1920s, most émigrés assumed they would return to Russia one day. For that reason, in September 1924 the Russian General Military Union (ROVS) was formed. The organization had three goals: to keep the exiles together as a community; to offer some social services so White soldiers would not be tempted to make their peace with the Soviet government; and to train people to infiltrate the USSR and assist in the overthrow of its leadership. From the mid-1920s, Plevitskaya's life story intertwines with that of ROVS, which is not surprising given that she was so public in her support of the organization and that her husband held a high-ranking position within it.

For three chapters in the middle of the book, Jordan describes the cat-and-mouse game played by ROVS and the NKVD – one that culminated in the kidnapping of General Miller. She outlines all the possible scenarios whereby Plevitskaya and Skoblin were recruited as Soviet agents and explains what likely motivated the pair to make such a drastic choice. She notes they were driven by self-interest – the desire for a higher standard of living as well as the chance to return to Russia one day – rather than by ideology. Skoblin was apparently told that he was working for Red Army intelligence and his job was to sow discord among ROVS leaders. Plevitskaya's tours provided a pretense for her husband to travel and to meet his new handlers.

From this moment on, the couple led a double life, but within an increasingly complicated political environment. Stalin, who had long been paranoid about ROVS' attempts to infiltrate and attack the USSR, became even more suspicious as ROVS members flirted with fascism and possible ties to Germany. Changing Soviet foreign policy made émigré life more difficult in France as well. Soviet propaganda depicted the Whites as pro-fascist, which only deepened French suspicions vis-à-vis the foreigners residing in their midst. In the mid-1930s, rumors began to swirl that Skoblin was a spy. He was eventually cleared by an honor court, but not everyone was convinced by his protestations of innocence. These years were made more difficult by a car accident that left Plevitskaya with recurring headaches and an overall decline in her health.

The kidnapping of General Miller shattered ROVS and exposed the Skoblins' double life. Skoblin, who lured Miller to the place of abduction, disappeared within hours. His ultimate fate is unknown, but, as Jordan argues, it is unlikely that the NKVD left him alive. His absence left Plevitskaya holding the proverbial bag. It is unclear how much the aging singer knew about the plot in advance, but she certainly was an accessory to it. And, as the only person the French authorities could get their hands on, Plevitskaya would bear the brunt of their desire to punish someone for such an egregious attack.

The final half dozen chapters of *Stalin's Singing Spy* describe Plevitskaya's legal battles – both in the criminal trial where she was charged with being an accomplice to the kidnapping and in a civil suit brought by the family of General Miller – as well as her life in prison. Jordan

persuasively argues that Plevitskaya lost the battle of public opinion during these travails. The public, and, more importantly, the jury saw her as a *femme fatale* in the mold of Mata Hari. They categorically rejected her efforts to portray herself as an illiterate peasant woman who knew nothing about politics and espionage, or as simply a grieving and deceived widow. In these circumstances, Plevitskaya was found guilty and sentenced to 20 years hard labour, followed by ten years of exile from France. This guilty verdict also meant that she automatically lost the civil suit as well. But by then she had no money left to pay the Millers. In prison Plevitskaya's health deteriorated rapidly and she died alone.

Nadezhda Plevitskaya's rags to riches and back to rags story is grippingly told in this biography. Jordan's work offers an intriguing look at the world of pre-revolutionary popular culture, and, notably, the opportunities its production offered to women. The book also shows how hard Russian exiles fought to keep their national identities during the interwar period when the political and economic climate made that increasingly difficult. Finally, the study tells us much about the workings of Soviet foreign intelligence in the lead-up to World War II. It is certainly an engaging read.