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Maria Lafont: The Strange Comrade Balabanoff. The Life of a Communist Rebel, Jefferson NC, McFarland & Co., 2016. 244 pp. – ISBN 978-0-78649878-9.

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Curiosity about Angelica Balabanoff's adventurous life and her relationships with prominent men such as Vladimir Lenin and Benito Mussolini drove Maria Lafont to research and write this biography of her. Lafont is not an academic historian and she does not pursue a political biography of Balabanoff, nor does she place her life in historiographical context. Nevertheless, her lively writing style creates a picture of people and places that make her book an engaging read.

Although she left published memoirs, Balabanoff has not been the subject of a scholarly biography. Starting with these, which have large chronological gaps, Lafont traces Balabanoff's life journey. She compares her memories to sources from more than thirty archives and libraries in eleven countries, as well as interviews. Lafont visited some of these but did not personally conduct research in all the archives from which she has acquired materials.

Balabanoff spoke thirteen languages. Most of Lafont's sources are in Italian, French, English, German, and Russian. Sources include Balabanoff's unpublished memoirs of childhood, her correspondence, police reports, newspaper articles, and government documents. Some parts of Balabanoff's life, such as her childhood and youth, are documented weakly, while there are many sources about her from the time when she lived in the United States. She achieved both fame and notoriety and often received prominent press coverage. Police forces across Europe and the U.S. tracked her carefully.

Balabanoff was not a political theorist but her fellow revolutionaries highly regarded and valued her as an agitational speaker, organizer, fundraiser, treasurer, and interpreter for the revolutionary movement. People were attracted to her kindness, compassion, honesty, and selflessness. Therefore, she acquired a large network of friends and comrades who came to her aid at crucial moments in her life.

Born in Chernigov, Ukraine into a wealthy merchant family, she explained her commitment to improving the lives of the poor as having arisen from sympathy for her family's servants, who she thought her mother mistreated. Balabanoff's family was of Jewish ancestry, but her parents or grandparents might have converted to Russian Orthodoxy. Religion doesn't appear to have played a strong role in her upbringing. Balabanoff claimed to have been about nineteen when she left Russia to study in university courses in Belgium, Germany, and Italy, but Lafont found that she was 28 years old and was probably trying to hide an unsuccessful marriage by claiming to be younger. Having rejected her upbringing in luxury, she adopted an ascetic way of life, accepting only a small monthly subsidy from her brothers. Upon having completed her courses of study, Balabanoff was offered a career as a professor, but she turned down this opportunity in favor of devoting her life to helping the poor. Having become a Marxist in 1901, she fell in love with Italy around the same time. Her mission focused on helping Italian immigrants carrying out manual work in Switzerland. She turned to journalism in 1904, when she founded and edited a weekly newspaper for Italian women workers, using material furnished by the workers themselves. A catalyst in her rise to fame and notoriety was her attack on a group of nuns who were stealing the wages of factory girls who lived in their convent. Her exposure of their abuse brought the church and its supporters to attack her in words and sometimes physically. By 1906 the Swiss police regarded her as a dangerous socialist and she was forced to relocate to Genoa in December 1906.

Although Balabanoff did not return to Russia for the 1905 Revolution, she was in close contact with Russian revolutionaries in emigration. She leaned toward the Mensheviks among the Russian Social Democrats. Rumors about the Bolsheviks' unsavory methods, such as the 1907 Tiflis bank robbery, made her leery of them.

Lafont devotes many pages to speculation about Balabanoff's rumored sexual liaisons with Lenin, Trotsky, Mussolini, and a host of others, but the evidence for these seems very weak. Scholars of political and social history may become frustrated by Lafont's creative writing in these sections. She notes that Balabanoff denied any attraction to Lenin upon their first encounter but does not want to accept her subject's words. Balabanoff's contacts made her valuable to ambitious politicians like Lenin and Mussolini. She helped to advance Mussolini's career prior to World War I while he was still a socialist.

Lafont allows that friendships with women were important to Balabanoff both emotionally and politically, but she does not relate her research to much of the secondary work on women revolutionaries or about gender in the revolutionary movement. She paints Balabanoff as an advocate of free love like Kollontai, despite Beatrice Farnsworth's assessment of Balabanoff in her Kollontai biography as "a puritan who rejected Kollontai's free sexuality."[1]

When World War I began, Balabanoff took an internationalist position against the war and had to leave Italy to avoid arrest. She returned to Switzerland. The war made the financial subsidies she received from her brothers less regular and the family wealth declined due to inflation. Therefore, she had to take on translation jobs to support herself. Nevertheless, her work on behalf of the socialist movement continued. She helped organize both the anti-war women's conference in March 1915 in Berne and the Zimmerwald conference of socialists opposed to the war. Strictly a pacifist, she did not favor Lenin's position on turning imperialist war into civil war.

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[1] Beatrice Farnsworth: Aleksandra Kollontai. Socialism, Feminism and the Bolshevik Revolution, Stanford University Press, 1980, p. 57.

After the February 1917 Revolution in Russia, Balabanoff was on the second train of socialists after Lenin's to leave Switzerland for Russia, arriving in May 1917. She was reunited with her brother in Petrograd. She still had no party affiliation, but the press had already labeled her a prominent Bolshevik. Forced to leave Russia in August 1917 due to accusations of spying for the Germans, she acquiesced to representing the Bolsheviks in Sweden. The only alternative for her would have been return to Switzerland, where she would have been completely sidelined from the revolution in Russia. This is how she became a member of the Bolshevik party.

Balabanoff represented the Bolsheviks' diplomatic interests in Scandinavia after they came to power. She also provided financial aid to Russian refugees and displaced persons there. Permitted to return to Russia in late 1918, she was only there long enough to inform Lenin about prospects for international revolution, which she thought poor. Unconvinced, Lenin ordered her to go to Switzerland in October 1918 to assist a general strike to take place there in November. Not long after her arrival, she was ordered to leave the country. During her escort to the train station, she was beaten, bloodied, and knocked out. Having finally arrived safely in Germany, she returned to Russia through Poland.

From 1918–22 she lived in the Hotel National in Moscow in the tiniest room she was permitted. The Russian Communist Party leaders denied her wish to live among workers. Having been absent during much of the year after the October Revolution, she was now forced to confront the reality of Red Terror. This took some time. Although one of her brothers had been brutally killed by peasants, she refused to perceive his fate as a consequence of Bolshevik policies.

Lenin acquiesced to Balabanoff's desire to help the arrested by giving her a position overseeing prisons, but she found there was little she could do. Her command of more than a dozen languages made her valuable in international work, but she complained to Lenin about untrustworthy foreigners being given money to spread propaganda in favor of Soviet Russia abroad. Lenin sent her briefly to Ukraine as Commissar of Foreign Affairs in February 1919 and then brought her back to Moscow to help translate at the first congress of the Third International. She represented the Socialist Party of Italy there. Lenin appointed her to be secretary of the Third International, but she despised its leader, Grigory Zinoviev, for placing himself above his comrades, unethical behavior, and material self-indulgence. Soon she found that Zinoviev was excluding her from important meetings and having her signature forged on important documents, but she still trusted Lenin.

Given her inability to work with Zinoviev, Balabanoff was transferred to the Third International's Southern Bureau in Ukraine, where she was to carry out propaganda to recruit foreigners to go abroad to promote Soviet Russia and to undermine morale among French military forces in Odessa. She also helped oversee conscription into the Red Army. In Odessa in summer 1919, she was confronted by her impoverished and prematurely aged sister and other relatives, but her relations with them were problematic because the Reds viewed them as counterrevolutionaries. She had to flee Odessa and then Kiev to avoid White armies. Her family departed for Constantinople and a nephew eventually reached Paris.

While in Ukraine, Balabanoff had witnessed atrocities toward civilian refugees, which she wanted the government in Moscow to address. She found, however, that both Dzerzhinsky and Lenin approved of these and so she became demoralized. Dismissed as Comintern secretary in 1920, she nevertheless served as an interpreter at the Second congress of the Third International in July 1920. Not permitted to leave Russia with the Italian delegation, she finally was allowed exit in 1921 for medical treatment after prominent Swedish socialists intervened with the Soviet government on her behalf. In April 1924, several months after Lenin died, she lost her Soviet citizenship and was purged from the Communist party. Lafont has scanty information about Balabanoff's movements in 1920–24. Creatively filling the gap, she constructs an elaborate hypothesis that Balabanoff went to Constantinople to reunite with her sister Anna, but there is no evidence for this.

Balabanoff obtained Austrian citizenship and worked a variety of odd jobs as a writer and translator. She returned to her aid work among poor Italian immigrants. In 1925, she moved to Paris and took up the antifascist cause. Infiltrating her networks of close friends, Mussolini's spies kept constant track of her. She also remained under the close observation of police agencies. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, she was very poor, malnourished, and often sick. She came close to committing suicide in 1931. In her vulnerable state, at age 65, she fell in love with a man in his thirties who turned out to be a spy sent from Mussolini to monitor her. The shock of his betrayal, Lafont writes, made Balabanoff suspicious of new acquaintances for the rest of her life.

By 1935, Balabanoff had finally saved enough money to leave Europe for the United States, where she lived until after World War II ended. There she gave assistance to war refugees and continued her campaign against fascism and Stalin's communism. She earned money from her books and lectures, but never enough to be comfortable. After the war ended, she lost her refugee status and could no longer stay in the United States. Her friends paid for her return to Italy.

Not long after Balabanoff arrived in Rome, she delivered an "openly anti-communist speech" at a socialist congress that "sparked a mutiny." (p. 197) Given threats to her life for disrupting the socialist movement and for her past links to Mussolini, her friends were able to obtain for her an open-entry visa to return to the U.S. if ever emergency threatened her. Nevertheless, she remained in Rome for the rest of her life, although she moved residences thirteen times over twenty years. The Italian Socialist Party paid her rent and she was kept up from a financial fund set up on her behalf in the U.S. Despite giving away much of what she received, she did not suffer extreme poverty in her later years. Her great fear was that Soviet agents would seize her and repatriate her to the Soviet Union. (p. 205)

Actively involved in Italian socialist politics throughout her later years, Balabanoff controversially called for "social revolution," (p. 207) but Lafont insists that she did not mean a violent revolution that would have provoked bloodshed. She retained much support among Italian socialists. Giuseppe Saragat, whose successful campaign for the presidency she supported in 1964, paid for her nursing home stay until her death in November 1965.

The chief consistency running through Balabanoff's life was her devotion to humanitarian socialism in principle and practice. Everywhere she lived, she devoted her time and energy to helping the poor, immigrants, refugees, and prisoners. Her genuine kindness and compassion won her a large network of devoted friends. Despite Lafont's unscholarly attempts to spice up Balabanoff's biography with shaky hypotheses about scandalous sexual affairs and other escapades for which there is little to no evidence, she deserves credit for giving prominence to Balabanoff's social mission in a lively narrative. Perhaps a historian with more time and resources to track down documents in Russia and Ukraine could shed more light upon the parts of Balabanoff's life that remain obscure in Lafont's account, but no academic historian has produced a complete biography of Balabanoff. This book is intended to appeal to a popular readership, but it may be of use to scholars who seek the most comprehensive narrative of Balabanoff's life available.