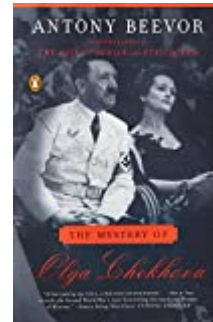




Antony Beevor. *The Mystery of Olga Chekhova: Was Hitler's Favorite Actress a Russian Spy?* London: Penguin Books, 2004. xvi + 300 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-303596-1.



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Skillful Example of Popular History

Although he attempts to solve the mystery of the enigmatic Olga Chekhova, award-winning British author Antony Beevor has produced an interesting book that is less about the successful actress than the tumultuous times in which she lived. Here the compelling, easily accessible style of Beevor's military histories, such as *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege* (1998), *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (2002) and *The Spanish Civil War* (1982) is on display. Despite the deceptive tease of its cover, a photograph of Olga sitting next to Adolf Hitler at a reception, the book teaches the reader more about pre- and post-revolutionary Russia from the engaging stories of her close family than about Olga Chekhova's role and function as an agent of the SMERSH, the Soviet intelligence agency. The volume contains a wealth of circumstantial evidence, but remains maddeningly inconclusive as to what spying Olga actually did for the NKVD. Despite the publication hype, the volume is not a spy thriller, but instead a family drama.[1] The tribulations of Olga's brother Lev Knipper and her Aunt Olga Knipper-Chekhova guide the reader through the convoluted period of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war, the dispersal of White Russians throughout Europe

and the United States and the confusing and conflicting relations between the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany. While Beevor fails to solve the mystery satisfactorily, his captivating stories serve as an engaging introduction to European history, albeit a superficial one for academic historians.

Born in Russia in 1897 to an ethnically German but Russianized middle-class family, Olga Kipner joined playwright Anton Chekhov's family through her wedding with Mischa Chekhov, the writer's nephew, who later took Stanislavsky's theory of method acting to America. The birth of a daughter in 1915 failed to mitigate Mischa's self-destructive streak and heavy alcoholism and Olga divorced him in 1917. Chekhova escaped the turmoil of revolutionary Russia in 1920 and fled to Berlin. Exploiting her illustrious name, she became a well-known film and theater actress, with an impressive career that included nearly 150 films between 1917 and 1974. While Josef Goebbels called her "eine charmante Frau" (p. 149) in his dairies, Hitler, who allegedly "adored her" (p. 5), honored her in 1936 with the title of State Actress of the Third Reich and sent her Christmas

presents with handwritten notes. These attentions led to the false impression that she had strong connections to the Nazi hierarchy and prompted SMERSH to use her as a “sleeper,” a Russian secret agent, “to be activated when her contacts in high places might be useful” (p. 105). According to Beevor, Olga Chekhova “was neither a Nazi nor a Communist” and “accepted invitations to Nazi receptions partly to safeguard her career and partly out of curiosity” (p.201). In his opinion, she was foremost a survivor, almost an opportunist, with great powers of self-preservation. Her importance was overrated by the Russians and she used her contact with the Soviet agency to arrange for her daughter, mother and niece to follow her to Berlin.

While researching *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, Beevor stumbled across her story, which had been hidden in the KGB archives; one can imagine the excitement at the discovery of such a character. But despite his intense research, including a close reading of SMERSH files passed in 1990 to Olga Chekhova’s first cousin, Vladimir Knipper; interviews with former intelligence officials and relatives; and an examination of personal correspondence between the different family members, the material concerning Olga’s activities as a spy remains sparse and inconclusive. Beevor seems more interested in and is more successful at providing vivid descriptions of the maddening complexity of life in Russia and Germany immediately before, during and after World War II. As he once stated in an interview: “The most interesting part of writing this book was its quality of a minor epic.”[2] A gifted storyteller, he introduces us to a gallery of fascinating characters such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, the co-founder of the Moscow Art Theater and the man who revolutionized drama at the turn of the century; Lavrenty Beria, the notorious chief of the NKVD, who might have had a sexual relationship with Olga; the German film director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, who directed her in her first German silent movie *Der Schloß Vogelöd* (1921); Erich Pommer, the leading figure of UFA. We get a glimpse of Soviet state security agencies such as the OGPU, the forerunner to the NKVD and later the KGB. More informative is the path of her brother Lev, an avant-garde composer and avid mountaineer who struggled with his identity as a Russian of German ancestry. Initially a White Guard fighting the Bolsheviks during the civil war, he later became an active NKVD agent for the Soviet state and was involved in several abortive plots to assassinate Hitler during the war.

The trials of Olga’s illustrious aunt Olya Knipper-Chekhova, widow of Anton Chekhov and founding

member and actress of the legendary Moscow Art Theater, illustrate the fate of Russians artists and intellectuals during the period. Beevor excels in marrying family and national histories through the story of this grande dame of the Moscow theater. The members of the troop were forced to flee across the Black Sea into the Caucasus and went into involuntary exile, first in Constantinople, before moving on to the Balkans. While suspect in the eyes of the new Bolshevik regime, they were allowed to return to Moscow and would later be sent to the United States as representatives of Russian cultural life. As Beevor points out, in an insight that he does not sufficiently develop, “a curious part of the relationship between politics and culture is the way that artists and writers generally achieve a far greater significance in a dictatorship than in a democracy” (p. 133).

Although Beevor uses convincing evidence to show her ties to SMERSH, Olga’s exact role as a Russian spy is still inconclusive, due to the fact that “a considerable quantity of documents on the subject ... have not seen, and probably never will see, the light of day” (pp. 231-232). Her benign, even favorable, treatment under the Russians after the war confirms her ties with the NKVD. After being uncovered and denounced in 1945 by English tabloids as “the spy who vamped Hitler,” she nevertheless remained in Germany and founded a cosmetic firm in Munich, allegedly financed with money from Moscow. In 1952 she published her first memoirs, entitled *Ich verschweige nichts*, which Antony Beevor dismisses as spurious and uses to expose her as a mythomaniac, pathological liar and self-dramatizer, giving numerous examples of her “compulsive mythologizing” (p. 27) and “embroidery” (p. 77).

The lay reader will appreciate Beevor’s clear and engaging depiction of complex events, while historians will bemoan the reduction of these very same events to simplified factors. One example of this tendency is his explanation and analysis of the causes of the February Revolution (p. 39). The author’s account of rumors and anecdotes, often of the titillating kind, such as tales of alcoholism, suicide and impotency, might satisfy the popular audience’s interest in such topics; however, more annoying for historians are Beevor’s numerous speculations. For example, Beevor writes that Hitler “would almost certainly have seen [an early movie of Olga Chekhova]” (p. 116), and Goebbels, we are reminded, was known as the goat of Babelsberg, due to his numerous affairs with starlets. He “probably did not really love women. He just needed to conquer them because he had a severe inferiority complex due to his physical limitations” (p. 131).

Especially frustrating is Beevor's wont to dwell on stories that were really rumors, up to the very last page of the book, when he then dismisses them as such. A typical example: "there are even rumors that aunt Olya was suspected of denouncing rivals and that she had promised young lovers in that case that she would save them from arrest. There is no evidence that either Lev, nor Aunt Olya, denounced anybody" (p. 120). On page 104, we learn that "in the absence of accessible records, one can only speculate about the details of [Olga's] recruitment by Lev."

Obviously written with a popular audience in mind, this volume comes across as a hybrid of historical work and mainstream literature. It combines, but underutilizes, thorough historical research with a (forced?) attempt at providing a John Le Carr-style historical spy story. The author, or his publisher, abstained from footnotes, confining references to a scarce thirty pages of "source notes" and a select bibliography of about fifty books. While the maps, genealogy and index are extremely useful, the filmography is too sloppy to be of use to researchers. Although the book jacket's promises

are not fulfilled, the reader is offered a compelling portrait of a remarkably talented and idiosyncratic Russo-German family during a period of extraordinary historical upheaval. It is a pleasant casual read, but will be of no particular use for academic historians.

Notes

[1]. Interesting are the differences between the British and Australian editions, which use a photograph of Olga Chekhova among Wehrmacht soldiers with the subtitle "Was Hitler's favorite actress a Russian spy?" and the U.S. and French editions, which use a photograph taken during Joachim von Ribbentrop's reception that depicts Olga Chekhova sitting between Hitler and Hermann Göring and appears without the subtitle. Both deceptively imply a strong connection with Hitler and are another example of exploitation of *Hitlermania* to attract readers.

[2]. Radio interview with Jill Kitson at the Cheltenham Festival of literature November 11, 2004. See a transcript of it at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/booktalk/stories/s1252541.htm>.

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