

The First Soviet Political Trial: Countess Sofia Panina before the Petrograd Revolutionary Tribunal

ADELE LINDENMEYR

The Bolshevik leadership had reason to expect that their first trial of a political opponent would be a success. The defendant was a wealthy aristocrat, a member of the Central Committee of the outlawed Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) party, and a vice minister in the Provisional Government. The unambiguous charge against her—taking and concealing government funds from the former Ministry of Education—would clearly demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of liberal leaders and further discredit the former government. A public trial would introduce the Bolsheviks' new instrument of revolutionary justice—the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Petrograd Soviet, created in late November 1917 and composed of ordinary workers and soldiers in conscious imitation of the French Revolution. From the perspective of her accusers, the likely guilty verdict against Countess Sofia Panina would show the world the superiority of Bolshevik justice and morality, and the legitimacy of their seizure of power. To the Kadets, the trial of a woman widely respected for her progressive philanthropy held equally great significance as an event that would demonstrate the illegitimacy of Bolshevik rule and their violation of the most fundamental norms of justice.

The actual proceedings that took place on 10 December 1917 yielded no unequivocal triumphs, however. The trial took several surprising turns, and its ambiguous outcome enabled both supporters and opponents of the defendant to declare victory and draw different lessons. Attracting national and international attention at the time, the trial is often mentioned briefly in histories of the Revolution.¹ It has received somewhat more attention

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¹For example, William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917–1918*, vol. 1 (1935; reprint ed. Princeton, 1987), 362.

from William Rosenberg and Natalia Dumova, historians of the Kadet party who analyze its effects on the relationship between the Kadets and the Bolsheviks in the weeks after October.² As one of the most colorful incidents of the period, the Panina trial enlivens histories of the early revolutionary period, but does it merit serious historical investigation in its own right?

Political trials have been a recurring event in the history of prerevolutionary and especially Soviet Russia. With its lone female defendant, the tsarist government's trial of the revolutionary Vera Zasulich for attempting to kill the Petersburg governor-general in 1878 is the most obvious precedent for the Panina trial. It similarly centered upon one symbolic political act to which the defendant freely confessed, and opponents of the tsarist government, like Panina's supporters, hailed the surprising verdict as a victory for their cause.³ The Panina trial might also be called the first Soviet show trial, to be followed by the more famous 1922 trial of the leadership of the Socialist Revolutionary party, the Shakhty trial of 1928, and the Moscow show trials of 1936–38. But this characterization assumes that the new Soviet leaders did not intend the Panina trial to be a legitimate effort to determine judicial truth, but instead orchestrated the proceedings and outcome beforehand.

At the same time, the Bolsheviks' fondness for political spectacles and rituals and their skill at inventing and staging them are well known.⁴ Precedents existed in the imperial and revolutionary eras: Richard Wortman's magisterial study has shown that the imperial government appreciated the political value of ceremonies, while Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii have recently explored the theatricality of revolutionary rhetoric and action during 1917.⁵ Defining themselves by the very novelty of their revolution, the Bolsheviks created spectacles to establish legitimacy, educate a politically illiterate population, and display to a national and international audience just how their system and values differed from those of the bourgeois world. The courtroom and the theater have been connected for centuries, but as Julie A. Cassiday demonstrates, mock trials were unusually common elements in early Soviet theater and cinema, and directly influenced later show trials. In her estimation the Panina trial shows the "nascent theatricality of the Bolshevik law court."⁶ Richard Stites speculates that the frequency of trials on stage and screen resulted from Bolshevik experiments with revolutionary tribunals in the early years of the Soviet justice system.⁷

²William Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution: The Constitutional Democratic Party, 1917–1921* (Princeton, 1974), 278–81; N. G. Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia i ee razgrom (oktiabr' 1917–1920 gg.)* (Moscow, 1982), 64–66.

³There are a number of other interesting parallels between Zasulich and Panina, but contemporary accounts never mention the earlier trial; Panina herself would have rejected any resemblance to the act of a terrorist. See Jay Bergman, *Vera Zasulich: A Biography* (Stanford, 1983), chap. 2.

⁴James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley, 1993); Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1989).

⁵Richard L. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1995, 2000); Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven, 1999), esp. chap. 3.

⁶Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (DeKalb, IL, 2000), introduction and chap. 1.

⁷Richard Stites, "Trial as Theatre in the Russian Revolution," *Theatre Research International* 23, no. 1:8.

Occurring only weeks after the October Revolution, the Panina trial represents not the staging of a polished dramatic performance in a courtroom, but the Bolsheviks' first attempt to formulate and display their vision of revolutionary justice. To borrow a concept from anthropology, the trial took place in a liminal time and place, during an uncertain and highly contested transition to a new regime, in a city where old rules and procedures were discredited, but new ones were only beginning to be invented.⁸ Panina herself described the uniqueness of the moment in 1939:

My arrest occurred at the early beginning of the bolshevist domination, when the instrument of their [government] was still in infancy and when chaos reigned in life and unexpected things happened, that would have been quite impossible later on. Real terror had not yet begun, and not only we, but the bolshevists themselves did not yet believe in the stability of their power.⁹

Standing between the political trials of the tsarist period and later Soviet show trials, the Panina trial offers a unique opportunity to understand revolutionary Russia at a time of simultaneous destruction and creation.

This article reconstructs the trial itself along with the events leading up to it in order to evaluate their significance in several intersecting contexts—the fluid, open-ended early days of the Revolution; Kadet opposition after October; the first Soviet efforts to build state structures and legitimacy; and the history of Russian and Soviet political trials and spectacles. Why was Panina chosen to be the first defendant before the newly created Revolutionary Tribunal, and what were the implications and consequences of her identity as a woman? Were the proceedings against Panina intended to be understood as a genuine legal process or a staged spectacle? What did the Bolsheviks hope to achieve, and why were they unable to control the proceedings? The trial stands out not only for what actually happened on 10 December but also for the contrasting ways participants and spectators interpreted it. It illuminates the hopes and fears of the Bolsheviks and their opponents at a time when the Kadets were seeking effective methods of opposition, and the Bolsheviks were forging instruments of authority.

WHY PANINA?

In 1917, Countess Sofia Vladimirovna Panina (1871–1956) was well known to both the educated and general Petrograd population. Unlike other prominent women whose renown came from their political activity, such as the Kadet Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, the Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai, or the Socialist Revolutionary Maria Spiridonova, Panina's name was associated with philanthropy. Her most important work was the *Ligovskii Narodnyi*

⁸For example, Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969). See Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000), 74, for an application of the concept of liminality to the Soviet press.

⁹Panina, "Such Is Life," Columbia University, Bakhtmetev Archive, Panina Papers (hereafter BAR Panina), Box 14, folder "Panina's Arrest, 1917 (1)," 5. This speech was delivered in English to an American audience in 1939.

Dom (LND), a community center she founded, directed, and financed for the working-class residents of a bleak and impoverished district on the capital's southern outskirts. The institution was noted for its progressive mission of popular education and cultural elevation. Petersburg socialists also knew it as one of the few places where groups of working-class people could legally assemble. Along with its daycare center, cafeteria, literacy classes, and theater the LND provided a cover and meeting place for socialist groups, especially during the 1905 Revolution.¹⁰ It even played a small but symbolic role in the life of Lenin, who addressed his first mass meeting in Russia there on 9 May 1906.

Panina herself tried to stay aloof from politics. Before 1917, she writes in a memoir, "I never belonged to any political party and my interests were concentrated on questions of education and general culture, which alone, I was deeply convinced, could provide a firm foundation for a free political order."¹¹ Yet even before the Revolution several factors linked her to the Kadet party and Russian liberalism: family ties (her stepfather was party founder Ivan Petrunkevich), her many acquaintances among the intelligentsia, and her own commitment to gradual progress and reform. Moreover, Panina's assertion that her social work was apolitical is disingenuous: the very existence of such an institution as the LND, devoted to the material, intellectual, and moral improvement of workers, implied a criticism of the tsarist status quo. No endeavor that enabled working-class people to associate with members of their own class and their social superiors could be innocuous in the eyes of the police.

War and especially revolution brought Panina out from the wings and onto the main political stage. During the war she worked for the Petrograd City Duma, directing the work of distributing assistance to the families of reservists called to the front.¹² It was probably this work, along with her reputation for supporting progressive social causes, that catapulted her into municipal politics after the February Revolution. On 8 March 1917 (International Women's Day in the Western calendar), not waiting for a new statute granting women equal political rights, the Petrograd Duma elected her and several other prominent women as delegates.¹³ When regular elections were held for a new Duma in August, she was elected.¹⁴ On the night of 25 October, with Red Guards besieging the Provisional Government's ministers in the Winter Palace, the Duma selected Panina as one of three official representatives to go to the cruiser *Aurora* in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the sailors not to fire on the palace.¹⁵

Panina's activities in 1917 extended to national politics as well. Helped no doubt by her ties to Petrunkevich and other Kadet leaders such as Prince V. A. Obolenskii, with whom she had worked on war relief matters in Petrograd, she was elected to the Kadet

¹⁰Police reports of politically suspect meetings there are in Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 102 (Departament Politsii), Osobyi Otdel, 1902, d. 992.

¹¹S. V. Panina, "Na Peterburgskoi okraine," *Novyi zhurnal*, bk. 49 (1957): 192.

¹²Kniaz' V. A. Obolenskii, "Moia zhizn' i moi sovremenniki. Vospominaniia," 1938, pt. II, GARF, f. 5881, op. 2, d. 541, ll. 143–46.

¹³I. I. Mil'chik, "Petrogradskaia Tsentral'naia Gorodskaia Duma v fevrale-oktiabre 1917 g.," *Krasnaia letopis'*, 1927, no. 2:191.

¹⁴*Vestnik Partii narodnoi svobody (VPNS)* (7 September 1917): 11.

¹⁵*Zhurnal Petrogradskoi Gorodskoi Dumy*, no. 93 (session of 25 October 1917): 3.

party's Central Committee in early May.¹⁶ In the same month she became the only female member of the Provisional Government cabinet when the first Ministry of State Welfare in Russian history was created, with Panina as assistant minister.¹⁷ After the formation of the second coalition cabinet in late July, she became one of the assistant ministers of education under the newly appointed minister, S. F. Ol'denburg.¹⁸ Finally, in the fall she ran unsuccessfully as a Kadet candidate for the Constituent Assembly.¹⁹

Personal ties, war relief work, and reputation help to explain why a woman who had steadfastly avoided the political spotlight before the Revolution—unlike, for example, her friend Tyrkova-Williams, a member of the Kadet Central Committee since 1906—suddenly became so prominent in 1917. Another important reason, of course, lies in the granting of political rights to women, which enabled Panina to run for municipal and national office.²⁰ Most important was a change of heart in Panina herself, spurred by the deepening political crisis and her antipathy toward the Bolsheviks. When the Provisional Government granted women equal rights and Panina was elected to the Petrograd Duma, she writes in her memoirs,

I fell into the very thick of political affairs. ... [S]ince many of those around me considered me a socialist, by reason of the nature of my activity and because of the fact that the latter proceeded among workers and the most deprived strata of the urban population, I considered it necessary, at a time of intensifying political struggle, to establish my position with complete precision and dissociate myself from the socialist madness that had seized the country: I joined the Party of Popular Freedom (K.-D.), which alone at that time, out of all the nonsocialist parties, openly fought against advancing Bolshevism. My entire future fate was determined by this moment.²¹

Panina's activities during 1917 elevated her to a level of political prominence rare for Russian women. She became known nationally and even internationally as the first woman ever to serve as a government minister.²² Until the October Revolution, however, her work stayed within the traditional feminine sphere of war relief, state welfare, and education. In the month after the Bolshevik seizure of power Panina's activities changed dramatically. Her home at 23 Sergievskaiia Street in Petrograd's fashionable Liteinyi district became the meeting place of three of the most important anti-Bolshevik organizations in the capital. Along with other assistant ministers she belonged to the "Little Council," also known as the

¹⁶ *VPNS* (18 May 1917): 11; Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 132.

¹⁷ S. Gogel', "Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennogo Prizreniia," *Prizrenie i blagotvoritel'nost' v Rossii*, 1917, no. 6–7:481.

¹⁸ Natal'ia Dumova, *Konchilos' vashe vremia* (Moscow, 1990), 201.

¹⁹ *VPNS* (23 November 1917): 6–9.

²⁰ Women received the right to vote in piecemeal legislation beginning in the spring, when the Provisional Government granted women the vote in municipal elections, and culminating on 20 July 1917, when they received equal rights in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. See Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton, 1990), 293.

²¹ Panina, "Na Peterburgskoi okraine," 192.

²² Although Panina served only as an assistant minister, contemporaries in Russia and abroad referred to her as a minister. Her unique political position attracted attention because Russia in 1917 was the first major nation to give women full political rights.

Underground Provisional Government.²³ She was also a member of the “Committee to Save the Fatherland and Revolution,” a group of Kadet and socialist Duma delegates headed by the mayor of Petrograd. Finally, the Kadet Central Committee also met secretly at her house after October.²⁴ Her presence no doubt helped to link these organizations and facilitated communication and coordinated action among them.

Panina also participated actively in the Provisional Government’s efforts to obstruct the Soviet takeover—what the Bolsheviks termed “sabotage.” On the night of the Revolution, 25–26 October, Kadet ministers Alexander Konovalov and Nikolai Kishkin issued an order instructing civil servants of the Provisional Government to keep funds and records out of Soviet hands. Shortly thereafter, with most ministers under arrest, the assistant ministers of the Little Council held their first meeting at Panina’s apartment, and decided to implement the order by transferring ministerial funds to foreign banks.²⁵ At about the same time, they approved a strike by civil servants.²⁶ The strike and the attempts to keep government funds out of Bolshevik control together constituted some of the stiffest resistance encountered by the Bolsheviks in the first weeks after October. On 15 November, acting as assistant minister, Panina ordered an official in the Ministry of Education to collect all available funds—both cash and bonds and other securities, amounting to almost 93,000 rubles—and transfer them to two other officials, who would deposit them according to her instructions.²⁷ Shortly thereafter a Bolshevik, Isak Borisovich Rogal’skii (identified in one source as the assistant commissar of education²⁸), arrived at the former ministry to take over for the commissariat, only to be confronted by uncooperative civil servants and 93,000 rubles missing from the treasury.

Rogal’skii filed an accusation against Panina with the Investigative Commission of the Petrograd Soviet’s new Revolutionary Tribunal, created in accordance with the first Bolshevik decree on courts on 24 November.²⁹ Rogal’skii and Panina were not strangers to

²³On the Little Council’s activities see A. Dem’ianov, “Zapiski o podpol’nom Vremennom Pravitel’stve,” *Arkhiv Russkoi Revoliutsii*, vol. 7 (Berlin, 1922), 34–52; and M. Fler, “Vremennoe Pravitel’stvo posle Oktabria,” *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 1924, no. 6:195–221.

²⁴Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 268–69; Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia*, 25–27.

²⁵Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 265; Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia*, 31.

²⁶Credit—or blame—for initiating the strike and concealment of funds has been attributed to several different groups. According to the chairman of the Little Council, civil servants themselves organized the methods and forms of their resistance, sending a delegation to the Little Council with their program of action (Dem’ianov, “Zapiski o podpol’nom Vremennom Pravitel’stve,” 35, 38–39). According to another version, the Committee to Save the Fatherland and Revolution, acting upon a proposal from Panina as a representative of the Kadet Central Committee, initiated the strike (Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia*, 30–31).

²⁷Panina’s signed order to the officials is in the trial dossier in GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10 (28 noiab. 1917–30 dek. 1917), ll. 1, 6–11. The exact bank or other location was never revealed, and Panina refused to name it to the Investigative Commission. Some sources state that the funds were deposited in a foreign bank. In her memoirs she simply says that she instructed the officials to deposit the money in a bank in the name of the Constituent Assembly (Panina, “Na Peterburgskoi okraine,” 192).

²⁸L. Kin, “Sud nad gr. S. V. Paninnoi,” *Vechernyi zvon*, 11 December 1917.

²⁹GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 1. The Decree on Courts, issued on 24 November, called on soviets to create revolutionary tribunals and accompanying investigative commissions “for the struggle against the counterrevolutionary forces ... and profiteering, speculation, sabotage and other misdeeds” of the bourgeoisie. The decree did not elaborate on the tribunals’ jurisdiction and procedures. The Petrograd Soviet was one of the first to establish its own commission and tribunal. A few weeks later, on 19 December, a second decree set out detailed instructions

each other. Both, along with Commissar of Education Anatolii Lunacharskii, had served as delegates in the Petrograd Duma; months of hostility between the Bolshevik and Kadet Duma fractions may have added to the motives behind his accusation. In its report on the case to the Revolutionary Tribunal, the Investigative Commission supported Rogal'skii's charge, calling Panina's act of removing "the People's money" from the former ministry and "hiding" it an act of "criminal sabotage" against Soviet authority, which was "throwing into disorder the government apparatus in general and the People's Commissariat of Education in particular." The commission ordered Panina's arrest.³⁰

In the circumstances the order for her arrest seems not only inevitable but even belated. In the course of November the Soviet government moved against the very underground groups to which she belonged. On 10 November the Committee to Save the Fatherland and Revolution was officially liquidated, and on 20 November the Sovnarkom decreed the arrest of all members of the Little Council. The Sovnarkom ordered the dissolution of the Petrograd Duma on 16 November, and two days later arrested its leaders.³¹ Panina's membership in these anti-Bolshevik groups and the Kadet Central Committee, together with her participation in the civil servants' boycott, placed her among the new government's most visible opponents from the liberal camp.

When a servant knocked on her bedroom door before dawn on 28 November 1917 and announced the arrival of a Bolshevik commissar and several soldiers with orders to search her home, Panina herself was not particularly surprised. She had anticipated her arrest throughout the preceding month of underground resistance to the Bolsheviks: "Each morning, when leaving the house, I held very small hopes of returning safe and sound to my own roof."³² Outside the windows of her home the capital was tense. The Provisional Government had designated 28 November for the opening of the Constituent Assembly, elections to which had taken place just two weeks before. Kadets and non-Bolshevik socialists viewed this event as their best chance to make a determined and united stand against the usurpers, although apprehensions for the safety of the delegates to the assembly were high, and many expected the Bolsheviks to prevent it from meeting.³³ Demonstrations in support of the assembly and against Soviet power had been planned for that day.

for the tribunals. Meanwhile, the establishment of the Cheka on 7 December created a more powerful counterrevolutionary agency whose jurisdiction overlapped with the tribunals. See Rex A. Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History*, vol. 1, *The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917–1919* (Gulf Breeze, FL, 1991), 52–53, 62–64, 73–75; and D. S. Karev, *Sudoustroistvo* (Moscow, 1948), 107–8, 115–16. The first decree is dated 22 November in Wade, but 24 November in Karev.

³⁰GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 1. The file on Panina's case does not contain an actual arrest order, making it impossible to say with certainty who actually ordered her arrest, and when. But the documents support the inference that the order came from the Investigative Commission on 26 November 1917, after it heard Rogal'skii's report.

³¹Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia*, 36.

³²Handwritten manuscript, untitled, undated, and unsigned but in Panina's handwriting, recounting her arrest and interrogation, p. 1, in possession of Vladimir Lehovich, and hereafter cited as Panina, "Arrest."

³³Panina optimistically expected that the Constituent Assembly would "put an end to the reign of unrestrained arbitrariness and assume the entire responsibility for the further struggle, which until then we, fragments of the Provisional Government and public self-government, had carried on" (*ibid.*, 2). Other Kadets were less sanguine. See N. Astrov, "Proobraz russkoi tragedii," *Poslednie novosti*, 18 January 1925, 2; and Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 277–78.

Lenin and other members of the Sovnarkom were also apprehensive. Soviet leaders were receiving reports of anti-Bolshevik unrest and the formation of counterrevolutionary groups in the Urals and the Don. Citizens opening their copies of *Izvestiia* that morning found it filled with alarming stories of counterrevolutionary plots in which the Kadets starred with Cossack generals as the principal villains. Workers and soldiers were enjoined to be vigilant and oppose any counterrevolutionary demonstrations in the capital on that day.³⁴

Comrade Gordon, the Bolshevik sent to search Panina's house and arrest her, received a windfall there. On the previous night the Kadet Central Committee had held a meeting at Panina's that did not end until after 1 A.M. F. F. Kokoshkin and A. I. Shingarev, two Kadet leaders who had served in the Provisional Government and had been elected to the Constituent Assembly, spent the night, and so fell into Bolshevik hands that morning along with Panina. Telephoning the Petrograd Soviet's headquarters at Smol'nyi for instructions, Gordon was told to arrest them, too, and bring them in with Panina for interrogation. He also set up an ambush at 23 Sergievskaiia for other Kadets, which snared Prince P. D. Dolgorukov later that morning.³⁵

Thus by midday on 28 November the Soviet leadership had four leading Kadets in detention, all of whom had planned to participate in pro-Constituent Assembly demonstrations that day. Gordon was gleeful over Panina's arrest. "Oh, oh, oh," she recalls the "clean-shaven little Jew" crowing in the car as they drove to Smol'nyi, "How amazed my descendants will be when they read that I, Gordon, searched and arrested Countess Panina, the first woman in Russia, such a famous philanthropist, the woman-minister."³⁶ The unexpected arrest of the three men, however, created a problem for the Soviet's interrogators. Claiming immunity as elected delegates to the Constituent Assembly, the Kadet leaders pointed out that there were no grounds for their detention. They denied any knowledge of either Kadet ties to the Cossack Generals Dutov and Kaledin, suspected of organizing anti-Bolshevik forces in the Urals and Don region, or Panina's removal of 93,000 rubles from the Ministry of Education.³⁷ Finally, the Sovnarkom solved the interrogators' dilemma and *ex post facto* produced grounds for the three men's arrest. At 10:30 that night it issued the famous decree, signed by Lenin, Trotsky, and the other members of the Sovnarkom, that laconically declared that "members of the leading institutions of the Kadet party, as a party of enemies of the people, are subject to arrest and trial before the revolutionary tribunals."³⁸ Dolgorukov, Kokoshkin, and Shingarev were then transported to the Peter and Paul Fortress.³⁹

³⁴Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia*, 52–53; *Documents of Soviet History*, 54–55 (for Lenin's accusations against the Kadets); *Izvestiia*, 28 November 1917.

³⁵Panina, "Arrest," 3–4; Kn. Pavel Dmitrievich Dolgorukov, *Velikaia razrukha* (Madrid, 1964) 57–59. On the 27–28 November meeting see Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 277–78.

³⁶Panina, "Arrest," 2, 4.

³⁷GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 12–14.

³⁸A copy of the decree is in the file on Panina's trial (*ibid.*, l. 3). Although the decree states that it is effective from the "moment of its signing," in fact it was applied retroactively to Dolgorukov, Kokoshkin, and Shingarev, arrested hours earlier. Dumova implies that the three were arrested as a result of the Sovnarkom decree (*Kadetskaia kontrrevoliutsiia*, 57).

³⁹None of the men came to trial. A band of sailors murdered Kokoshkin and Shingarev in the hospital to which they had been moved from prison in early January; Dolgorukov was freed a few months later.

The charge against Panina, the Bolsheviks' original quarry, and the grounds for her arrest were much more straightforward. At her interrogation late that night at Smol'nyi, she admitted that she had signed the order to remove the 93,000 rubles from the ministry, but refused to say where she had ordered the money to be sent. Unintimidated by her arrest and detention, she declared to her interrogators that she considered it her "obligation to give a report about the whole activity and about the money only to the Constituent Assembly, as the only legitimate authority. I refuse to make any explanations to commissars or the Investigative Commission."⁴⁰ Perhaps the Investigative Commission would have freed Panina had she revealed the whereabouts of the funds. By refusing, however, she squarely challenged the legitimacy of the commission and the new regime. The commission ordered that she remain under arrest and committed her for trial before the newly created revolutionary tribunal.⁴¹ The prisoner was sent to Petrograd's Vyborg Women's Solitary Prison.

Soviet authorities may not have planned Panina's arrest, apparently ordered on 26 November, to fall on the day of the opening of the Constituent Assembly, 28 November. They seem to have had no prior knowledge of the meeting of Kadet leaders held at her home the night before to plan demonstrations in support of the assembly. But her arrest coincided with two important steps taken by the Soviet leadership on 28 November: the dismissal of the Constituent Assembly (rescheduled to open 5 January, when it was dissolved for good), and the late-night decree that outlawed the Kadet party. These actions in turn considerably heightened the significance of her arrest, transforming its context from the efforts by civil servants to sabotage the new government to the Bolsheviks' suppression of their political opponents by force.

News of her arrest and imprisonment raised a huge outcry in Petrograd. Educational, professional, and women's associations and workers' groups held protest meetings and sent messages of outrage to the press and solidarity to the prisoner.⁴² The incarceration of such a familiar public figure, known not for her politics but for her good works, seemed additional proof of the Bolsheviks' violation of the basic norms of civilization. Several themes appear repeatedly in these messages: her contributions to popular education and cultural development, her own selflessness and other moral qualities, her defense of freedom and justice in tsarist times—and the irony of labeling such a person an "enemy of the people." Portraying Panina as a political martyr, the message from parents and teachers at a Petrograd gymnasium was typical in praising her for traditionally masculine virtues of "civil courage" and "fidelity to duty" and a more feminine trait, her "enormous reserve of love."⁴³ The protests appear to have given the Petrograd Soviet second thoughts about trying so popular a prisoner. On 5 December one of the members of the Soviet's Investigative Commission, a sailor named Alekseevskii, offered Panina a deal: she would be released from prison if she

⁴⁰GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 16.

⁴¹Ibid., ll. 1, 6.

⁴²*VPM* (14 December 1917): 8–10, printed protest declarations from the LND, residents of the surrounding district, and numerous public organizations. Newspaper articles about the arrest and trial and protests (letters to the editor, and so on) are also in Russkaia Natsional'naia Biblioteka, Otdel rukopisei, f. 423 (Lbovskii, A. N.). Similar materials along with messages of support Panina received in prison are in BAR Panina, Box 14, folders "Panina's Arrest" (1 and 2).

⁴³Excerpted in *VPM* (28 December 1917): 10.

paid bail in the amount of 180,000 rubles.⁴⁴ She refused, and according to one source, “mockingly” responded, “You want to get double what was taken by me from the ministry treasury for safekeeping?”⁴⁵

As Alekseevski’s offer suggests, the choice of Panina as the defendant in the first Bolshevik political trial was in some respects both unlikely and problematic. Surviving accounts do not indicate that she played an exceptional leadership role in the underground organizations to which she belonged. Nor do her actions stand out as unusual or particularly threatening to Soviet power. Other senior Provisional Government officials encouraged the boycott and participated in resistance actions, and other Kadet leaders possessed much greater potential influence to lead effective opposition. Moreover, in the overwhelmingly male world of Russian politics her identity as a woman makes her seem an even less likely Bolshevik target, as some of the protest messages implied.

Several other considerations, however, help to explain the decision to try Panina first. The case may have seemed straightforward and the outcome certain. Just as the tsarist government expected an easy conviction of Vera Zasulich in 1878—after all, she shot General Trepov before a roomful of eyewitnesses—clear evidence of Panina’s “crime” in the form of her signed order to remove government funds supported the charges against her. Under arrest, Panina was an innocent female victim of ruthless Bolshevik commissars. By proving her crime, a trial would demonstrate her political agency and justify her imprisonment to the outraged public. It would also help to justify the 28 November decree outlawing the Kadet party, which had evoked strong opposition from non-Bolshevik socialists.⁴⁶ Her repeated refusals to cooperate or compromise probably strengthened the Soviet’s resolve to bring her to trial. A successful trial with such a well-known defendant would also direct public attention to the new tribunals and the principles of revolutionary justice they represented. Finally, Panina symbolized everything the Revolution opposed: titled aristocracy, inherited wealth, *noblesse oblige* philanthropy, bourgeois liberalism. A public trial of this rich countess on the charge of taking the “people’s money” must have seemed a valuable propaganda opportunity to a new regime that characterized itself as the defender of the oppressed and the enemy of exploiters of all kinds.

THE TRIAL

The trial on 10 December attracted enormous public attention. In the capital and beyond, the Russian press of various political affiliations reported it, as did foreign newspapers such as the *New York Times*.⁴⁷ Participants and other eyewitnesses also recorded the event, including Ia. Ia. Gurevich, an educator and friend whom Panina had asked to be her official

⁴⁴GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 16–17.

⁴⁵Ia. Ia. Gurevich, “Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi v revoliutsionnom tribunale,” *Russkoe bogatstvo*, 1917, no. 11–12:286.

⁴⁶The Central Executive Committee’s debate on 1 December about the Sovnarkom’s actions against the Kadets and the Constituent Assembly is in *Documents of Soviet History* 1:54–58 (by 150 votes to 98, the CEC upheld the Sovnarkom).

⁴⁷Reports of Panina’s arrest and trial appeared in the *New York Times* on 14, 25, and 26 December 1917, and in an editorial on 31 December 1917.



FIG. 1 “Grafina Panina,” a sketch by journalist Foma Railian, who attended Panina’s trial, in “Intelligentsiia pered sudom ‘Tribunala’ (Vpechatleniia i nabroski v zale suda),” *Novaia Petrogradskaia gazeta*, 12 December 1917. The artist’s sympathetic portrayal of Panina emphasizes the polarities of class, gender, and appearance in the courtroom.

defender, and well-known foreign correspondents John Reed, Louise Bryant, and others. (Panina also wrote her recollections of the trial, but only much later.⁴⁸) Given the polarized political atmosphere surrounding the trial, it is not surprising that all of these sources, as well as the unpublished trial transcript, are more or less subjective, biased, and often erroneous. The following account, based primarily on the transcript, the longer and more detailed newspaper reports, and Gurevich’s narrative (which was written immediately after the trial), seeks to reconstruct as accurately as possible the drama that took place on 10 December.⁴⁹

The location chosen for the trial symbolized its revolutionary significance. It was held in the beautiful *style moderne* palace of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, cousin of the emperor and erstwhile commander-in-chief in the detested war. Overcoming hostility from the palace’s servants, the Petrograd Soviet had commandeered it for the tribunal only a short time earlier.⁵⁰ Although entrance was by special ticket only, the palace’s small concert hall was filled to overflowing long before the trial was scheduled to begin at noon. As if mimicking the rhetoric of class struggle, the spectators fell into two distinct groups. Representing the defeated but defiant bourgeoisie, the majority were Panina’s friends and supporters, both men and women—professionals, actors, artists, educators, public activists,

⁴⁸Panina wrote two accounts of the trial: “Such Is Life” in 1939; and “Na Peterburgskoi okraine” in 1948.

⁴⁹“Delo Paninnoi. Protokol Zasedaniia Revoliutsionnogo Tribunala, 10 dekabria 1917 goda,” GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 20–22; “Sud bolshevikov nad gr. S. V. Paninnoi,” *Novaia Petrogradskaia gazeta*, 12 December 1917; Kin, “Sud”; Gurevich, “Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi.” Although *Vechnyi zvon* was anti-Bolshevik and its report is sympathetic to the defendant, it nevertheless gives the most detailed and balanced account of all the newspapers.

⁵⁰I. Zhukov, “Revoliutsionnyi tribunal (vospominaniia pervogo predsedatelia Tribunala),” *Rabochii sud*, 1927, no. 22:1755–56.

coworkers from the LND, “predominantly intelligentsia of the 1860s type,” commented one newspaper.⁵¹ The audience included a smaller, predominantly male contingent of workers and soldiers. Also present were Petr I. Stuchka, chairman of the Investigative Commission and commissar of justice, and Rogal’skii, the original accuser from the Commissariat of Education. Those planning to speak in Panina’s defense included Gurevich and G. M. Kramarov, a member of the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Soviet who belonged to the Menshevik United Internationalists.

With the opening of the trial delayed an hour (the automobile bringing Panina to the palace broke down twice on the way⁵²), the tension, excitement, and impatience in the hall had mounted by 1 P.M., when the judges filed in. The seven-member, all-male Revolutionary Tribunal consisted of two soldiers and five workers from different Petrograd factories, including its chairman, Ivan P. Zhukov. Six of the seven were members of the Bolshevik party. Their external appearance blurred the distinctions so evident in the audience between bourgeois and proletarian, and between liberal and revolutionary justice. Although the two soldiers on the tribunal wore their uniforms, the five proletarian judges donned bourgeois attire—high white collars, ties, and dark suits—in an effort, perhaps, to boost the court’s legitimacy in the eyes of a hostile public.⁵³ They took their places behind a raised, red-draped table, sitting on exquisite upholstered chairs of Karelian birch formerly belonging to the grand duke. The electricity in the palace had gone out, so two “garish red glass lamps with green shades” illuminated the hall.⁵⁴ Zhukov opened the trial with a brief speech. Confusing the Revolution of 1848 with 1789, he cited the “revolutionary tribunals” created in France “sixty-nine years ago” as the model for Russian revolutionary justice. Like the French tribunals, Zhukov warned, the Russian tribunal “will severely judge all those who go against the will of the people, who obstruct it on its path,” but those who are “innocent before the will of the revolutionary people” will find the tribunal “the most reliable defender.”⁵⁵

Panina then entered the hall, escorted by two guards carrying bayonets. Just as the judges dressed in a manner that belied their class origins, the forty-six-year-old defendant, wearing a “severe black tailored suit and a small close-fitting turban,” resembled “a social worker in any American city” rather than a countess, according to one eyewitness.⁵⁶ The spectators, who had demonstratively remained seated when the tribunal entered, rose from their seats with shouts of greeting and lengthy applause. The anti-Bolshevik sentiment prevailing in the courtroom was thus evident from the start.

Although the tribunal was supposed to represent revolutionary justice, the proceedings combined judicial innovation with convention. Zhukov read aloud the Investigative Commission’s report and its charge of criminal sabotage against Panina, and presented documents (but no witnesses) as evidence, including Panina’s original 15 November order

⁵¹Kin, “Sud.”

⁵²Gurevich, “Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi,” 289.

⁵³There is a photograph of the tribunal in Louise Bryant, *Six Red Months in Russia: An Observer’s Account of Russia Before and During the Proletarian Dictatorship* (New York, 1918), facing page 196.

⁵⁴Bessie Beatty, *The Red Heart of Russia* (New York, 1918), 295.

⁵⁵Quoted from the version of Zhukov’s speech in the trial transcript from GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 20.

⁵⁶Beatty, *Red Heart of Russia*, 296.

to officials in her ministry. He then asked “Citizeness” Panina whether she admitted to being guilty of taking and hiding 93,000 rubles “that did not belong to you” from the ministry; she denied it. Then, instead of calling upon an official prosecutor, Zhukov, in imitation of French revolutionary precedents, sought one from the assembled crowd. Rising from his seat, he addressed the courtroom: “The prosecution has the floor. Is there someone [to act as prosecutor]?” No one volunteered.

There being no prosecutor, official or otherwise, Zhukov let Gurevich speak next for the defense. Appealing to the judges not as a lawyer but as an ordinary citizen like themselves, he tried to persuade the tribunal that it could not possibly convict Panina—not according to law, because at present, “in the heat of the political struggle,” there were no universally recognized laws in Russia; nor according to their conscience, for her services to the Russian people were too well known and significant. “You can only try her,” Gurevich argued, “as political opponents, but then this would not be a court, but a continuation of civil war.”⁵⁷ It was the Revolution and its system of justice that were on trial, not Panina, he implied.

Gurevich also raised a point that would become a focus of contending interpretations of Panina’s actions and motives: the nature of the funds she was accused of taking and the impact of her action. Originally merely referred to as the cash and securities on hand at the ministry, in his speech the funds are identified as donations made to the ministry for various charitable purposes. Therefore, Panina’s act of removing these funds could not have disrupted the ministry’s operations.⁵⁸ He concluded by reminding the judges that the eyes of the world were upon them: “You must not, before the entire world, return evil for good and violence for love (*platit’ zlom za dobro i za liubov’ nasiliem*). Don’t commit [an act of] violence in the name of the Russian people to its shame before the entire world.”⁵⁹

Spectators reacted to Gurevich’s speech with a torrent of ardent, prolonged applause. “A kind of ecstasy of unanimity seized the hall,” reported one newspaper, and many in the courtroom wept.⁶⁰ An old man with a huge beard, a populist named Lomov who had spent years in political exile and now worked at the LND, fell into hysterics. Sobbing, wailing, and wringing his hands, he cried out, “I can’t, I can’t, I don’t have the strength to survive this. Why, oh why do they do this? I can’t, I’m dying.” Still sobbing and repeating, “Why, oh why?” Lomov was carried out of the courtroom.⁶¹

Zhukov then gave the floor to a man from the audience who identified himself as N. I. Ivanov, a factory worker by occupation and a Socialist Revolutionary by political affiliation.⁶² Using the imagery of light and darkness typical of the intelligentsia’s rhetoric, Ivanov

⁵⁷Gurevich, “Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi,” 291.

⁵⁸GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 20ob.; Kin, “Sud.” Of course, disruption *was* the intention of the civil servants’ boycott.

⁵⁹Gurevich, “Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi,” 291.

⁶⁰Kin, “Sud.”

⁶¹Kin’s recounting of this scene in *Vechernyi zvon* is the most detailed and colorful. The transcript merely reports, “A scream from the public. A fit of hysteria in one of those present (an old man, they say, one of the workers at Panina’s Narodnyi Dom). They take him out of the hall” (GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 21).

⁶²According to one newspaper, before the trial Ivanov presented the court with a note stating his desire to speak (“Sud bol’shevikov,” *Novaia Petrogradskaia gazeta*, 12 December 1917).

passionately defended Panina's educational and cultural work during the years of tsarist repression. This countess, undeterred by the "people's sweat and smoke," personally conducted classes for them, "lighting in the working masses the holy fire of knowledge." Emphasizing her maternal dedication and love for the common working people, he told the court how working people found "light and joy" at her Narodnyi Dom, while their children received more affection there than in their own families. Such a woman was not an enemy of the people, but its best friend. The Russian people must not repay her with black ingratitude. Like Gurevich, Ivanov turned the trial into a test of the Revolution. Reminding the judges of Panina's national, even international reputation and of the wider audience watching her trial, he begged the court: "Don't shame yourselves, the revolution, the Russian people with a conviction." Ivanov ended his speech on a dramatic personal note: "I myself was an illiterate, dark person. At her Narodnyi Dom, at her school I learned how to read and write. At her lectures I got to know the light." Turning to the defendant and bowing low, he said, "I thank you."⁶³

As Panina herself put it years later, Ivanov's speech "produced in the hall the effect of an exploding bomb, and provoked unusual agitation among the judges."⁶⁴ Even her most ardent supporters could not have hoped for a more eloquent vindication of her life's work than this tribute from a member of the proletariat.⁶⁵ Zhukov and Commissar of Justice Stuchka, who, according to Panina, "directed the entire performance," improvised a response. First, Zhukov asked Panina if she would agree to return the money taken by her within two days. She refused; the money was deposited in a bank in the name of the ministry, and would be released only to the Constituent Assembly, she insisted.⁶⁶ The court's next step was to bypass Kramarov, the member of the All-Russian Soviet who had been promised an opportunity to speak in Panina's defense, and to give the floor to another worker, identified only as Naumov.

Naumov spoke heatedly for Panina's conviction. For all of her good deeds and "nobility" (*blagorodstvo*), she nevertheless represented the class that had exploited and oppressed the Russian masses. "If there are those who saw the light in Panina's little window, millions never saw that light. ... It would be a crime to forget this." Panina must be viewed not as an individual but as a class and party opponent, "who participated along with all the representatives of her class in organized opposition to the people's authority"—this is her crime. Urging his "comrades" on the tribunal not to be swayed by Panina's past work, Naumov called upon them to punish those who sought to obstruct the working people's

⁶³Accounts of Ivanov's speech differ in both their length and wording. This reconstruction is based on the reports of the speech found in the trial transcript, Gurevich's article ("Delo grafini S. V. Paninoi"), and the newspapers *Verkhnyi zvon* (which Gurevich termed the best) and *Novaia Petrogradskaia gazeta*.

⁶⁴Panina, "Na Peterburgskoi okraine," 197.

⁶⁵It is possible, of course, that Ivanov's speech was not spontaneous but arranged in advance by Panina's supporters. As he himself mentions, he had been a frequent visitor to the LND, and his words do echo the rhetoric of cultural uplift so characteristic of the Russian intelligentsia. One spectator, journalist F. R. Railian, states that the speech left the "impression of a staged defense, concocted behind the scenes by his party," though which party that would be, Railian does not say. See F. R. Railian, "Intelligentsiia pered sudom 'Tribunala' (Vpechatleniia i Nabroski v zale suda)," *Novaia Petrogradskaia gazeta*, 12 December 1917. No other contemporary or historical account of the trial suggests this possibility, however, and Ivanov's words seem to have taken everyone by surprise.

⁶⁶GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 21ob.

“right to happiness.” “In the name of the millions of oppressed, I call upon you to act. If in our path there stands a noble (*blagorodnaia*) individual, we are very sorry, but so much the worse for her.”⁶⁷ According to some accounts, Naumov’s speech was interrupted several times by hostile shouts from the audience.⁶⁸

Zhukov then gave the floor to Rogal’skii “for factual observations.” Accusing Panina of “embezzlement” (*khishchenie*), the representative of the Commissariat of Education gave another speech for the prosecution. Unlike Naumov, who at least allowed that Panina may have done some good deeds, Rogal’skii impugned her motives. In a bitter personal attack on the defendant herself rather than her class, he attempted to turn her reputation for selfless charity against her. In particular, he contested Gurevich’s characterization of Panina’s action as harmless, since the money involved was charitable contributions. On the contrary, he charged; most of the funds she took were unpaid wages owed to ministry workers called to military service.⁶⁹

In an interesting inversion of gender Rogalskii accused the reputedly compassionate countess of victimizing helpless members of her own sex, and grouped her with male oppressors from the bourgeoisie: “Wives [of conscripted ministry employees] and they themselves, wounded, hungry, come to the ministry every day and weep, in tears they beg for help, and there is nothing to pay them with, because some gentlemen (*gospoda*) allow themselves to take other people’s money for safekeeping.” Nor did Panina pay any attention to the needs of the country’s poor women teachers, “whose lives are pure heroism and pure torment.” Her “embezzlement” has definitely impeded the work of the ministry, he continued. There is no point in waiting for the Constituent Assembly; “Hungry people, who are besieging the ministry now, want to eat today.” And if the minister, assistant ministers, and other high officials were worried about the safety of government funds, why did they allocate money for holiday bonuses for themselves, he charged? Greed and self-interest, he implied, not state interests or the common good, motivated Panina’s and others’ acts of sabotage. If she is acquitted, Rogal’skii concluded, the entire working world will protest.⁷⁰

Zhukov gave the final word to the defendant. Panina insisted that as the only top official of the ministry still at liberty after the October takeover, she had a duty to take the

⁶⁷Versions of Naumov’s speech vary even more than those of Ivanov’s. Unsympathetic observers described it as rambling and incoherent; Panina called it “nonsense.” This account of Naumov’s speech is based on the trial transcript (GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 21ob.–22), and *Izvestiia*, which devoted almost one third of its report of the trial to it, and only one sentence to Ivanov’s (“Zasedanie Revoliutsionnogo Tribunala. Delo gr. Paninnoi,” *Izvestiia*, 12 December 1917). According to Gurevich, of all the newspaper accounts only *Izvestiia*’s version of Naumov’s speech, though “not entirely exact, with some literary reworking,” preserved his basic points (“Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi,” 292–93).

⁶⁸Kin, “Sud”; Panina, “Na Peterburgskoi okraine,” 197.

⁶⁹Accounts of the trial differ on the nature of these funds. According to the trial transcript and one newspaper account, Panina stated that the money belonged to civil servants in her ministry, and that she acted in order to guarantee them their wages (GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 22; “Sud bolshevikov,” *Novaia Petrogradskaia gazeta*). According to Kin in *Vechernyi zvon*, however, Panina stated that she took the funds for safekeeping because they were contributions from the people.

⁷⁰The longest report of Rogal’skii’s speech is in the trial transcript, on which this account is based (GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 22).

money for safekeeping. Appealing to the soldiers on the court and in the hall, she played a variation on Rogalskii's theme, inverting both gender and class in her defense:

I think that soldiers will understand me best of all. Soldiers who know the role of the sentry know that no one can take a sentry from his post except the one that placed him there. I was that sentry at the ministry. The people placed me there, and I can only give a report [and] return the money only to the people, only to its legal representative—the Constituent Assembly. That I will do.⁷¹

At this point Panina almost lost the composure she had maintained throughout the proceedings. In a voice breaking with emotion, she thanked Ivanov for his words in her defense, from which she obtained “all that I could have wished to receive” in return for her work on behalf of the people. A “tumultuous and lengthy ovation” followed her remarks.⁷²

Agitation and disorder still reigned in the courtroom after the judges filed out to confer on their verdict. Commissar Stuchka scurried after them.⁷³ Spectators surrounded Ivanov to shake his hand and thank him. Kramarov loudly protested Zhukov's refusal to let him speak. Rogal'skii demanded to see the judges in order to give them additional documents; he was refused. Gurevich filed two protests, one against this attempt by Rogal'skii to submit undisclosed documents to the court, and a second against the reversed order of the proceedings, which had put the prosecution after the defense.⁷⁴ Former Minister of Education Ol'denburg marched up to Rogal'skii and loudly announced, “You know perfectly well that you are lying!”⁷⁵

Nor did the courtroom quiet down when the judges returned less than an hour later. Kramarov rose to demand the floor; Zhukov in great annoyance told him to sit down, and when the Menshevik continued to speak, he ordered the guards to remove him. As Kramarov was being dragged from the courtroom, he shouted, “This will be a blot on your conscience!”⁷⁶

When a degree of quiet finally fell on the courtroom, Zhukov read the tribunal's unexpected and contradictory verdict. The tribunal found her guilty of “opposition to the people's authority,” and decreed that “citizeness” Panina must remain in prison until she returned to the Commissariat of Education the money she had taken. But, “taking into consideration the past of the accused,” the tribunal limited her actual punishment to “public censure.”⁷⁷ The unusual verdict caused another storm in the courtroom; even the transcript of the trial tersely admits that an “indescribable tumult” filled the hall. While some in the audience laughed, others whistled in approval. Panina's supporters applauded, waved their hats and handkerchiefs, and shouted congratulations and “Hurrah!” A convoy of armed guards hurriedly conducted the defendant out of the hall as some spectators threw themselves toward her.

⁷¹Kin, “Sud.”

⁷²Gurevich, “Delo grafini S. V. Paninnoi,” 295.

⁷³Panina, “Na Peterburgskoi okraine,” 198. Other sources do not mention Stuchka meeting with the court after it retired.

⁷⁴Gurevich's protest note is in GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 24.

⁷⁵Kin, “Sud.”

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, l. 23.

Recollecting the trial years later, Panina expressed gratitude for what was, at that time, “the lightest sentence possible”; but her refusal to return the money sent her back to prison, where she felt “trapped in a hole without possibility of escape.”⁷⁸ She was released on 19 December after friends in Petrograd gave the Revolutionary Tribunal almost 93,000 rubles to ransom her out of prison.⁷⁹

WHO WON? INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TRIAL

With its unexpected twists and contradictory verdict the trial lent itself to varying interpretations. Participants and observers saw in it a reflection of their hopes and illusions during these very early days of the Revolution. Petr Gerasimov, for example, a member of the Kadet Central Committee writing in the party weekly, found the trial a cause for hope. The worker Ivanov’s defense vindicated the intelligentsia’s dedicated work to elevate the masses. It and other features of the trial—Naumov’s acknowledgment of Panina’s service to the people, the judges’ confusion and vacillation, and the verdict—all indicated that the Russian people would eventually see through the Bolsheviks’ lies and deceit. Writing in the same party weekly, Panina’s friend and fellow Central Committee member Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams similarly characterized the trial as a moral victory for the accused and everything she represented.⁸⁰

Other anti-Bolshevik observers were jubilant over the event, interpreting it as a demonstration of the Bolsheviks’ weakness and unpopularity. *Volia naroda*, the leading newspaper of the Socialist Revolutionary party, declared the trial a “stunning triumph” for Panina and the Kadets.⁸¹ The Petrograd newspaper *Vechernyi zvon* followed its detailed account of the trial with an extremely pro-Panina editorial, “Trial of the Bolsheviks.” The tribunal did not dare convict Panina, it maintained, because of the obvious sympathy for her on the part of everyone in the hall. Yet the tribunal also did not dare to go against orders from Smol’nyi, the Bolshevik headquarters; hence the “pathetic” sentence of “public censure.” “We experience a feeling of joy,” the editorial concluded triumphantly, “because once again we find faith in the dark crowd that for a time had lost its reason.”⁸²

Looking back at the trial years later, Panina herself believed that it ended “with my complete triumph.”⁸³ In her posthumously published recollections she cites the speech by the unknown Ivanov and the kindness of the female criminals she met in prison to support her faith in the Russian people. Echoing the optimism still expressed by other Kadets in late 1917, she concluded: “For me those days have forever remained the emblem of open possibilities.”⁸⁴ To Panina as to other Kadets, the trial defeated the Bolsheviks’ clumsiness and

⁷⁸Panina, “Such Is Life,” 7.

⁷⁹GARF, f. R-1074, op. 1, d. 10, ll. 25–29.

⁸⁰P. Gerasimov, “Voprosy partiinoi zhizni. III. Na skam’e podsudimykh,” *VPNS* (28 December 1917): 1, 3–4; A. Tyrkova, “Kogo sudili?” in *ibid.*, 4–6.

⁸¹Quoted in Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 281.

⁸²“Sud nad bol’shevikami,” *Vechernyi zvon*, 11 December 1917.

⁸³Panina, “Such Is Life,” 6. In this account she describes the trial as a “semi-tragic and semi-comic situation.”

⁸⁴Panina, “Na Peterburgskoi okraine,” 201.

malicious attempts to stir up class enmity and affirmed the possibility of dialogue and cooperation across class divisions.

Such rosy interpretations of the trial's significance did not serve the Kadets well, however. Their reactions to it reveal the party's considerable capacity for self-delusion after the October Revolution. Panina's "triumph" encouraged them to underestimate the strength of their opponents; as William Rosenberg has written, "the trial's outcome seemed to vindicate the party's hope that Lenin and the Bolsheviks could not long survive on their own." The trial also supported the Kadets' faith in the power of law, and so "it still seemed possible as late as December 1917 to continue the anti-Bolshevik struggle with legal methods."⁸⁵

Pro-Bolshevik commentators also stretched the truth to make the trial and its outcome conform to their hopes. To be sure, neither the Soviet government nor any other Russian observer claimed that it was a "stunning triumph" for the Bolsheviks. The party newspaper *Pravda* did not report it at all. On the surface, *Izvestiia's* account is largely factual and devoid of editorial commentary. But by stressing particular aspects and incidents, especially Naumov's and Rogal'skii's speeches indicting Panina and Kramarov's disrespect toward the tribunal, and minimizing others, such as Ivanov's defense, the newspaper turned the trial into an expose of the antirevolutionary sentiments held by the former assistant minister and her bourgeois and socialist supporters.

One of the main participants was more forthright in acknowledging that the trial was less than a ringing success for the new government. In a brief memoir written in 1927, Zhukov in effect admitted that the tribunal did not work very well at first. It was organized in great haste, he explained, and faced enormous hostility and hatred from the bourgeoisie; furthermore,

It was very difficult at first for me, as chairman of the Revolutionary Tribunal, with not the slightest experience in judicial matters, a joiner by occupation, who received no directives from anywhere, acting in the complete absence of procedural rules only as [my] revolutionary conscience dictated, to orient myself in the conditions of that time.⁸⁶

American socialists John Reed and Louise Bryant, however, hailed the trial as a victory for the tribunal, an assessment supported not only by their ardent pro-Bolshevik sympathies but also by numerous distortions and errors of fact. Reed's report stressed the bourgeois audience's hostility and disrespect toward the court, and the sharp contrast between the "smooth speech" of Panina's defender Gurevich, whom Reed erroneously calls "one of the cleverest lawyers of Petrograd," and the worker Naumov's earnest words. Completely misrepresenting the outcome of the trial, Bryant reported that Panina "decided

⁸⁵Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution*, 281–82.

⁸⁶He devotes only one sentence to the actual trial (Zhukov, "Revoliutsionnyi tribunal," 1756–57, 1759). Zhukov rose quickly to occupy important positions first in the Cheka, then in various economic commissariats, becoming Commissar of Local Industry in the RSFSR until he was arrested and shot in 1937. See E. V. Ershova, "Pervyi protsess Petrogradskogo Revtribunala v 1917 godu," in *Neizvestnye stranitsy istorii Verkhnevol'zhia: Sbornik nauchnykh trudov* (Tver', 1994), 96n.

at once to relinquish the funds.” Both Reed and Bryant emphasized the fierce-sounding Revolutionary Tribunal’s humanity and moderation. Instead of sentencing her to the guillotine, Reed wrote, she was freed “to return to her palace!” Bryant asserted that “in almost any other country in such tense times they would have killed Panina, especially since she was one of the chief saboteurs against the new regime.” She ends with her own indictment of Panina: “With her experience she could have been of great assistance, but she did everything possible to wreck the proletarian government.”⁸⁷

American journalists Bessie Beatty, correspondent for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, and Albert Rhys Williams also attended the trial. Although their accounts are more accurate and less hostile toward Panina than Reed’s and Bryant’s, they also favored the tribunal. Instead of inaugurating a red terror, the tribunal with its mild verdict demonstrated the Revolution’s humanity, wrote Beatty: “It was a far cry from this exhibition of revolutionary justice to the guillotine, almost as far as it was from that system of organized injustice of the Tsars that kept the endless procession of men and women marching toward exile and death.” Williams, impressed by the judges’ solemnity (something that unsympathetic observers found quite comic), regarded the revolutionary tribunals as the embodiment of “sublime innocence and undimmed hope.”⁸⁸ Soviet historians have echoed their judgment that the trial showed the tribunal to be both fair and humane.⁸⁹

An event of high drama, passionate emotion, and poignant surprises, the Panina trial carried immense but ambiguous symbolic meaning.⁹⁰ Initially it seemed to pit the wealthy bourgeoisie, class cooperation, and philanthropy against the working masses, class struggle, and social justice. In the course of the proceedings such starkly opposed categories became blurred, however. Panina turned out to be only one of several defendants on trial, which included, depending on the observer, the Bolshevik party, the Revolutionary Tribunal, and the Russian Revolution itself, or the Provisional Government, the intelligentsia, or Russian womanhood. The proletarian court dressed like bourgeois lawyers and mixed French revolutionary forms with standard court procedures. Panina acquired several conflicting gender identities, from the first woman minister and mother of the poor to a soldier on duty or one of the “gentlemen” oppressors. Did she embody the feminine qualities of love and compassion or male virtues such as civic courage? The boundaries separating the individual and class, seemingly so clear in socialist ideology, lost their clarity. Was “nobility” a social

⁸⁷John Reed, “How the Russian Revolution Works,” *The Liberator* 1 (August 1918): 16–17; Bryant, *Six Red Months in Russia*, 194–96.

⁸⁸Beatty, *Red Heart of Russia*, 301; Albert Rhys Williams, *Journey Into Revolution, Petrograd 1917–1918*, ed. Lucita Williams (Chicago, 1969), 163–65.

⁸⁹Soviet-era Russian accounts have stressed the justice of the charges against Panina and the tribunal’s humane verdict. See Dumova, *Kadetskaia kontrevoliutsiia*, 65–66; D. L. Golinkov, *Krushenie antisovetskogo podpol’ia v SSSR*, 2 vols., 3d ed. (Moscow, 1980), 1:77–79; E. Finn, “Pervyi Revoliutsionnyi Tribunal,” *Sovetskaia iustitsiia* (April 1977): 16–18; and K. I. Kozlova and V. S. Orlov, “Pervoe zasiedanie narodnogo revtribunala,” *Voprosy istorii*, 1977, no. 10:211–15.

⁹⁰William H. Sewell, Jr., analyzes the power of a single event to determine subsequent meanings ascribed to a revolution in “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* 25 (December 1996): 841–81. I am grateful to Michael Hickey for this reference.

class or a human character trait? Panina herself was simultaneously an aristocrat, a bourgeois, a representative of the intelligentsia, a friend of the people—and its enemy.

The trial's relationship to law and justice was similarly confusing. Had the defendant committed a crime? To Bolsheviks such as Rogal'skii, Panina committed an act of theft, embezzlement, sabotage. To Panina and her supporters, of course, the real crime was the Bolsheviks' actions against the Provisional Government and Constituent Assembly. The final verdict simultaneously convicted and exonerated the defendant.

Much of this ambiguity can be attributed to the unique moment when the trial occurred. As Gurevich pointed out in his speech at the trial, no one could really say what *was* the law at this time. Fear, elation, confusion, and, in retrospect, innocence characterized the atmosphere in Petrograd in early December 1917, when no one could know for certain the relative strengths of the opposing sides and the final outcome of the Revolution.⁹¹ While the Kadets were searching for effective means of resistance, the Bolsheviks were inventing instruments of authority and displays of legitimacy.

Another source of ambiguity was the trial's dual purpose—a “real” trial to prosecute and convict a defendant for a specific crime, and a demonstration or “show” trial to introduce a new kind of court and justice to the nation and the world. No script for this trial appears to have been prepared in advance. Instead, the organizers expected a “just” verdict to come about through the spontaneous interaction of the court and the spectators. The spontaneity and improvisation that distinguished the Panina trial were features that theorists of avant-garde theater recommended for the stage as well as elements of French revolutionary trials, upon which early Soviet courts were closely modeled, according to Julie Cassiday. The absence of a script also served an important didactic purpose: “Witnessing and participating in the judgments of the revolutionary tribunals promised to be a reliable means of accelerating the development of spectators’ revolutionary consciousness.”⁹²

Spontaneity and improvisation produced some unwelcome surprises for the prosecution at the Panina trial, however. The trial's organizers surely regretted allowing the defendant's supporters into the courtroom, for the judges from the beginning confronted a vociferously hostile audience. That audience failed to produce a voluntary accuser “from the people”; instead, a worker rose to speak in Panina's defense. The judges were inexperienced and, perhaps, insufficiently coached. Panina turned out to be a bad choice as the first defendant. Maintaining her self-control throughout the trial, she defied the tribunal's attempts both to intimidate her and to reach a compromise. It proved difficult to make her crimes against the Revolution serious enough to weigh against her record of social service. Rogal'skii's argument that the funds she ordered to be removed from the ministry were the back wages of office workers called to military service represented an unsuccessful effort to undermine the defendant's reputation. At the next session of the Petrograd tribunal in late December at which Zhukov presided, the defendant was the notorious monarchist conspirator Vladimir Purishkevich. From Zhukov's own account, however, the tribunal does not seem to have had more success in controlling the proceedings at this trial; again a

⁹¹See Mary McAuley, *Bread and Justice: State and Society in Petrograd, 1917–1922* (Oxford, 1991).

⁹²Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial*, 38–39.

⁹³Zhukov, “Revoliutsionnyi tribunal,” 1757–59.

“bourgeois public” hostile to the court filled the hall, and the defendant gave a three-hour speech!⁹³ The failure of the Bolsheviks to use the Panina trial for propaganda afterwards suggests the new government did not consider it a victory; it was American Bolshevik sympathizers who hailed the trial as a propaganda victory for the Revolution.

For all their well-documented attention to propaganda and spectacle, the Bolsheviks had much to learn in late 1917.⁹⁴ While comparisons between the Panina trial and subsequent Soviet trials are beyond the scope of this article, some of the differences with the next major public trial of political opponents deserve mention. The Soviet government undertook extensive preparations for the 1922 trial of leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary party, who were accused of specific crimes punishable under the Soviet Criminal Code. A carefully selected audience reliably applauded Communist participants in the trial and jeered the defendants. Although the defendants failed to cooperate by confessing, the government nevertheless made extensive use of the trial for political propaganda and education.⁹⁵ In one very important way, however, the Panina trial set a fateful precedent for future political trials. By admitting her opposition and the act it provoked, Panina in effect established the guilt of subsequent defendants. By framing her act as “sabotage,” the tribunal defined the Bolsheviks’ political opponents as enemies and dissent as treason. Future trials of political “enemies” would raise the charge of sabotage countless times, a charge supported by definitions first formulated in the Panina trial.

But was the trial in fact a triumph for the liberals, as Kadets proclaimed? Although the defendant attracted sympathy and support, she did so less as a representative of the Kadets than as an embodiment of virtues often ascribed to Russian women. Maintaining an attitude of aloofness from class and political conflict, Panina appeared as a woman with a deep sense of public duty, who had devoted her life and fortune to serving others. Instead of putting the Kadet party and the Provisional Government on trial, then, the Bolsheviks unwittingly tried Russian Womanhood, with its cultural definition of self-sacrifice.⁹⁶ But the Kadet party, which even before October had shunned propaganda, did not, and perhaps could not, exploit the “moral victory” of the Panina trial for its propaganda potential.⁹⁷ It produced no poster or leaflet devoted to Panina or her appearance before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Unlike the Bolsheviks, of course, the Kadets did not have much capacity to produce propaganda in late 1917. Party leaders were in prison, in hiding, or, like Panina herself, fled the capital in the first months of 1918. Nor did the party have a national organization capable of producing or distributing propaganda. But as their pronouncements after the verdict suggest, the Kadets drew unfortunate conclusions from the Panina trial. If in late 1917 the Bolsheviks were novices at staging effective political spectacles, their liberal opponents had little appreciation of their importance.

⁹⁴Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge, England, 1985), introduction.

⁹⁵Marc Jensen, *A Show Trial Under Lenin: The Trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Moscow 1922*, trans. Jean Sanders (The Hague, 1982).

⁹⁶See Lindenmeyr, “Public Life, Private Virtues: Women in Russian Charity, 1762–1914,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18 (Spring 1993): 562–91.

⁹⁷On the Kadet party and propaganda see Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 69.