

Mother Russia by Rachel Douglas

A Russian princess in the U.S.S.R.

A Soviet journal hails the patriotism of blue-blooded Kitty Meshcherskaya, related to Dostoevsky's patron.

More descendants of the old Russian noble families are streaming into the center of attention in the Soviet Union. One of the more extraordinary instances of this was the popular weekly *Ogonyok's* October issue (No. 43) feature on the octogenarian Princess Yekaterina Aleksandrovna Meshcherskaya, who is alive in Moscow. In telling her story, author Feliks Medvedev drew attention to a most important aspect of the Russian Revolution: How Cheka (secret police) chief Feliks Dzerzhinsky and a number of other aristocrats guarded the adoption of the blue-bloods into the new regime—which many of their families had helped to create, overthrowing the Romanovs.

The Meshchersky family is descended from Tatars of the Crimean Khanate (annexed by Russia in 1783, as part of Prince Potyomkin's "New Russia" expansion project under Catherine the Great), who were known as the princes Shirinsky. The Shirinsky-Shikhmatov family, which played an important role in the Cheka spy organization known as "the Trust," was of similar origin. In the early 14th century, a Shirinsky prince named Mukhamet established himself in the Meshchera region, later the Tambov Province of Russia; his son, Beklemich, "converted to the Orthodox religion under the name of Mikhail," according to genealogical records.

Even the immediate family of "Kitty" Meshcherskaya reaches back nearly two centuries: She was a child in her father's old age. Her father, Aleksandr Meshchersky, was born in 1822, when Czar Alexander I ruled Russia, and died just before the Rus-

so-Japanese War of 1904.

Ogonyok related the survival of Princess Meshcherskaya and her young widowed mother, and carried four pages of excerpts from her memoirs. Meshcherskaya experienced 13 arrests, but she holds that "Soviet power never deprived me of freedom. It always let me go, after people without conscience or honor had filed bad reports on me." To live, she mainly taught singing, but also held menial jobs. "Later, she began to write in newspapers and journals about the preservation of old houses in Moscow." *Ogonyok* quoted in full a letter she wrote in 1983 to Patriarch Pimen of the Russian Orthodox Church/Moscow Patriarchate, about the vandalization of the grave-site of one Tatyana Baranova, a Meshchersky family nanny who was a partisan hero during Napoleon's invasion of Russia.

"She wants," gushed Medvedev, "for people to know the Meshchersky family's history of serving Russia. . . . Her 'blue' blood was held against her so many times. . . . As a true Russian woman, she preserved the memory of the glorious deeds of her family. And, having already lost any hope of publishing her memoirs, she lived until the time of *perestroika*, when her desire is being fulfilled."

Ogonyok did not mention that the Meshchersky family already had a revolutionary tradition. This is no mystery, because the great surge toward revolution, from the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 up to 1917, was heavily financed and directed "from above," by the anti-Western, landed aristocrats, who participated in the conspiratorial Holy

Brotherhood and ran the secret police, the Okhrana.

The first cousin of Meshcherskaya's father was V.P. Meshchersky, who in the late 1870s published the infamous *Diary of a Writer* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose works are being re-popularized in the U.S.S.R. today. In this work (alongside the vilest outbursts of anti-Semitism and Russian imperial fervor), Dostoevsky argued that the Russian revolutionary nihilists, predecessors of the Bolsheviks, were doing holy work by cleansing Russia of Western European pollution. V.P. Meshchersky, a friend and cousin of Okhrana founder Count N.P. Ignatyev, went on to sponsor the notorious Okhrana agent provocateur Sergei Zubatov.

In the excerpted memoir, Princess Meshcherskaya fondly recalls another Ignatyev cousin, Gen. A.A. Ignatyev, nephew of N.P. Ignatyev. Stationed as Russian military attaché at the Paris embassy before 1917, A.A. ("Lyosha") Ignatyev became a Red Army officer. She writes, "He held in his name in a Paris bank around 200 million rubles. 'This is Russia's money, it belongs to the Russian people,' said Count Ignatyev, sending all 200 million through Comrade Krasin to Moscow."

The princess's own mother acted likewise. In 1917, Yekaterina relates, her mother said, "No matter what awaits us, I will never leave my Rodina," or Motherland.

The first time her mother was arrested by Bolsheviks, she was accused of selling a Meshchersky-owned Botticelli *Madonna*—"speculating with the people's property"—but Dzerzhinsky gave her a chance to clear herself, and she sent out a note to her daughter, "Kitty, give them the Botticelli. Mama." The painting was fetched, the prisoner let go, and Dzerzhinsky instructed her to see him if there were any more trouble.