

About the author

2 Meet Gabriella Saab

About the book

3 Historical Note

13 Further Reading

14 Reading Group Guide

P.S.

Insights,
Interviews
& More . . .



About the author

Meet Gabriella Saab



Janie Long Photography

GABRIELLA SAAB is the author of *The Last Checkmate*. She graduated from Mississippi State University with a bachelor of business administration and lives in her hometown of Mobile, Alabama. She is of Lebanese heritage and is one of the cohosts of @HFChitChat on Twitter, a recurring monthly chat celebrating the love of reading and writing historical fiction. ♪

Historical Note

I have said it before, and I will say it again: please read this author's note for more insight regarding the real history and real people who inspired this novel, but wait until after you've read the book.

If you have finished the book, you may proceed.

I came across the inspiration for this story when I was researching my debut novel, *The Last Checkmate*. In doing so, I stumbled across a young woman named Zinaida Martynovna Portnova, a member of the Belarusian resistance who poisoned Nazis. How could I pass up the opportunity to tell her story? Since I'd been considering a dual timeline for this novel, I started researching women in the Russian Revolution to see if I could find another interesting figure to use as inspiration for a second storyline. Sure enough, I did: Fanya Kaplan, who was executed for an assassination attempt against Vladimir Lenin. I also discovered Vera Figner, a noblewoman who left her family to join the revolution. From these women, my characters Mila and Svetlana were born, and I included a fictionalized version of Fanya Kaplan as well.

I had access to some excellent research resources, some named below, but much of this history was difficult to uncover, and reports often conflicted. Though Mila's life is significantly modeled after Zina Portnova's, and Svetlana's after Vera Figner's and Fanya Kaplan's, sometimes I blended ideas from conflicting reports or developed my own thoughts to craft these characters and this novel. It *is* fiction, after all. ►

About the book

Historical Note *(continued)*

Zina Portnova was born in Leningrad to Belarusian parents, and her father worked at the Kirov Plant. In the summer of 1941, then-sixteen-year-old Zina went to visit her grandmother in the Vitebsk Region of Byelorussia—now Belarus—and, shortly after that, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union. I took creative liberty by including the Vitebsk Region in the early days of the occupation. When a group of soldiers seized her family's cattle and struck her grandmother, Zina was infuriated and resolved to join the resistance to free her country from Nazi oppression. A fictional version of this account motivates my character Mila to seek vengeance and justice by joining the resistance.

In Obol, Zina joined a resistance group that was organized by the Komsomol, a name derived from the Russian name for Communist Union of Youth, or All-Union Leninist Young Communist League. Zina's group was led by Yefrosinya Savelyevna Zenkova, who was rumored to have gone by the nickname Fruza. According to accounts, she was born into a peasant family in Ushaly, located in the present-day Shumilina District, and was asked by a group of partisans to establish a Komsomol presence in Obol in order to report on Nazi activity in the area and use the railway to gather insight on matters such as troop movements. Since Zenkova was only eighteen at the time and all her members were teenagers and young adults, they were named the Young Avengers. This group spread propaganda, gathered information on Nazi troops, and participated in acts of sabotage against

them, and Zina Portnova joined them at age seventeen.

In 1943, Zina secured employment as a kitchen aide in the Nazi garrison in Obol, where she began poisoning the soldiers. In this book, you may recall a scene where the garrison soldiers become suspicious due to an outbreak of a supposed illness, so they accuse Mila of poisoning their food. To prove otherwise, she eats from the dishes she prepared, including those laced with arsenic—though she knows it will make her sick, even kill her if her body absorbs a large dose. Her risk pays off, and the men believe she is telling the truth regarding her innocence. She purges the poison at her first opportunity by drinking whey, and although she still gets very sick, she survives and returns to work.

As unbelievable as it might sound, this was taken out of Zina Portnova's real life: Multiple accounts claim she really was accused of poisoning the soldiers and did eat contaminated food in front of them to prove she was, in fact, *not* poisoning it. The Nazis let her go. Though she survived, reports say she went into hiding for a while, then re-infiltrated the garrison later. Rather than having my character hide, I wanted her to be able to return to work, so I lessened the severity of her poisoning and had her devise a way to place blame on her coworker, a woman named Zina—and yes, I named my Zina after the real Young Avenger.

Following Zina's capture by the Gestapo, reports vary about what happened next. Some say Zina took her Gestapo interrogator's pistol, shot him ►

Historical Note *(continued)*

and a few others, and fled before being caught in the woods. Others claim she shot a few men and was caught after her gun misfired. Either way, she was recaptured and tortured, then possibly killed during interrogation or taken to the woods and executed on January 15, 1944. According to reports, all the Young Avengers, except Fruza, were eventually caught and executed.

On July 1, 1958, both Zina Portnova and Yefrosinya Zenkova were declared Heroes of the Soviet Union—a posthumous award for Portnova, while Zenkova lived until 1984. You may have noticed that a fictionalized version of Yefrosinya Zenkova also appears in this novel. Much of Fruza’s character is as true to the limited research on her as I could find, and much of Mila’s is heavily based on Portnova’s life. *Stalin’s Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* by Kenneth Slepyan was a fascinating account of the partisan experience, though I condensed and simplified the Young Avengers for story purposes.

Once I had the idea for my World War II character, I wanted to tie in the Russian Revolution, a fascinating and pivotal part of Russia’s history. *Caught in the Revolution* by Helen Rappaport was an incredible read, providing so much insight into the circumstances leading up to the overthrow of the Romanov family and the Bolshevik Party’s ascension to power. Svetlana Petrova’s character is a composite of the real Fanya Kaplan, featured in this story as a secondary character, and Vera Figner.

Fanya Kaplan’s real name is not actually known. Various sources refer to

her in different ways, including Fanny Efimovna Kaplan, Dora, Feiga Haimovna Roytblat, Feiga Khaimovna Roytblat-Kaplan, and Fanya. An article titled “The 1918 Attempt on the Life of Lenin: A New Look at the Evidence” from *Slavic Review*, Vol. 48, No. 3, credits her as Feiga Khaimovna Roitman, later Fania (also spelled “Fanya”) Kaplan. Going by this source, I use Feiga Khaimovna Roitman as her birth name and combined Fanya Kaplan with one of her other listed patronymics, Efimovna, as the name she adopts after marriage; the Pale of Settlement was one of the few areas where Jews and other minorities were permitted to live, so marrying someone who resided outside of it was necessary to achieve permission to leave.

According to this article, Kaplan was born in 1887 to a Jewish family in a Ukrainian province, Volhynia. Most likely she married a man named Kaplan who lived outside the Pale and adopted his name, then she settled in Kiev in 1906, joining a few other anarchists who were planning an attack on the governor-general. When an explosion went off in her hotel room and killed a maid, she was arrested and a Browning revolver was uncovered in her room; she insisted she knew nothing and did not reveal accomplices. She was charged and sentenced to death, but after her age—nineteen at the time of the arrest—was taken into consideration, the sentence was lessened to life imprisonment in the Nerchinsk katorga.

Within the Nerchinsk katorga, conditions in Maltsev, or Maltsevskaya, were not as severe as in other prisons, ►

Historical Note *(continued)*

so women often studied, but the lack of activity had an impact on their mental health. For Kaplan, this led to severe headaches and temporary loss of sight that became more and more permanent. In my story I increased the severity of conditions in Maltsevskaya to include hard labor and had this be the cause of Fanya's health problems.

By 1912, Kaplan went completely blind but learned to read Braille and care for herself, and she familiarized herself with others by touching their faces; she transferred to Akatui Prison, where a doctor recommended electric treatments at a prison hospital. These helped to restore her sight somewhat. She was released from Akatui in 1917, following the overthrow of the imperial government, which lifted the sentences of political prisoners; for simplification purposes, I kept my character Fanya in Maltsevskaya and liberated her alongside Svetlana. After years, even decades, of imprisonment, the women in these labor camps and prisons had formed close bonds, which I wanted to illustrate by having Svetlana and Fanya remain together following liberation.

The real Kaplan was undergoing more medical treatment when the October Revolution took place in 1917, not in Moscow with the revolutionaries, as my character is. Kaplan went to Moscow in February or March of 1918 to rejoin some of her friends from prison and began considering political terrorism against the Bolsheviks. Little more is known about what she did until the attempt against Lenin's life.

On August 30, 1918, testimonies

conflict: some say a witness saw Kaplan shooting Lenin, yet other evidence says no one actually saw who pulled the trigger outside the Mikhelson Armaments Factory that day. Red Guards arrested all suspects, including Kaplan, though accounts of her arrest differ. Some say her nervous, odd behavior was what drew attention to her; then, once in Cheka custody, she admitted she shot Lenin but refused to provide further information. Most sources report that her execution took place on September 3, 1918, in the Kremlin courtyard.

Some historians speculate that Kaplan was an anarchist and not affiliated with the Socialist Revolutionary Party, as no evidence proves one way or another where her political affiliations fell. And with so many conflicting reports about the assassination attempt against Lenin, it is impossible to know if Kaplan really was responsible; given her vision problems, many find reason to doubt. Could a woman who was nearly blind carry out such an attempt, or was she caught and falsely accused, so she accepted blame to protect her party members? I thought this was fascinating, and, of course, it got me wondering: What if someone else had carried out the attempt, but Fanya accepted the blame for it?

This started my idea for Svetlana's character, while Vera Figner provided much of her background. Through Figner's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, I dove into a firsthand account of this woman's fascinating life, in which she left the nobility to join a revolutionary party. Of course, it left me with so many questions: Did other revolutionaries trust that her ►

Historical Note *(continued)*

heart was with their cause? Did she regret breaking ties with her family? Why were her convictions so strong? How far was she willing to go for her beliefs? Such a woman made for a complex, difficult character with so many layers, which was so much fun for me as a writer.

In 1852, Vera Figner was born to a noble family in Kazan and dreamed of becoming a lady in court. She attended the Rodionovsky Institute until 1869 and then returned home, where she lived in the country and, as a result, rarely interacted with anyone outside her family. Her uncle was a “thinking realist” who began sharing his ideas with Vera. He expressed negative opinions about the wealthy and encouraged freedom from class and religion, universal education, equal rights for women, and utilitarianism. Gradually, Vera became what she called a “repentant noble” and no longer aspired to the comfortable life her class promised; she wanted to attend university and do good for others. Instead, her parents presented her to society and she married, but she adopted more radical views and eventually separated from her husband.

Figner was part of the People’s Will, which later developed into the Socialist Revolutionary Party. She began spreading revolutionary ideas, though some people were suspicious of her due to her aristocratic background. At last, she and her party members concluded that terrorism was necessary to effect change; one man attempted to assassinate Tsar Aleksandr II and failed, so Figner dodged investigations and continued to support attempts to assassinate the tsar.

After more failed assassination

attempts, the revolutionaries managed to mortally wound the tsar; Figner escaped arrest while a few others were caught and executed. The government began enticing people to turn in revolutionaries, so many became spies and informed on their friends. Figner was ultimately betrayed, arrested, held in the Fortress of Saints Peter and Paul, then transferred to Shlisselburg. Her mother entreated the government for mercy, so Figner was released in 1904, after twenty years of imprisonment.

Because neither Figner nor Kaplan were Bolsheviks, this gave me the opportunity to explore some lesser-known political sides of the Russian Revolution—namely, the Socialist Revolutionary Party, one I learned about mostly through *Captives of Revolution* by Scott B. Smith. Most people know the Bolsheviks ultimately claimed control of the government, but I was fascinated to learn more about the various parties vying for political power. As briefly mentioned in the story, the Socialist Revolutionaries did indeed attempt to link Bolshevik violence with the violence of the imperialist Old Regime. I learned about the Bolshevik secret police from *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* by George Leggett, and this organization evolved into the NKVD and later the KGB. Vera Orlova is fictional but is inspired by real women who worked for the Cheka, many of whom were notoriously ruthless; Vera also represents countless Bolsheviks who were unflinchingly devoted to their cause, and many of these were people who had suffered terribly under imperialism. I did my best to clarify the views of each party, but politics were ►

Historical Note *(continued)*

simplified and condensed for story purposes.

Many of the other events in the story did happen, including the execution of five men condemned for the attempted assassination of Tsar Aleksandr III—among them was Aleksandr Ilych Ulyanov, Vladimir Lenin's elder brother. This served to increase Lenin's motivation toward revolutionary pursuits. The Khodynka Field tragedy in 1896, the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1905, and the execution of more than seven thousand Soviet civilians, mostly Jewish, at the Gully of Petrushino between 1941 and 1943 did happen as well, unfortunately.

Aside from the liberties mentioned here, I attempted to stay true to all names, events, dates, and places, although allow me to note that all dates are listed in accordance with the Gregorian calendar for simplification, to the best of my ability. Soviet Russia changed from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in February 1918, right in the middle of my timeline, which might have created unnecessary difficulty for the reader. The October Revolution of 1917, for example, is remembered historically in accordance with when it took place on the Julian calendar, since that was the calendar used at the time, but if you refer to the chapter in which it takes place in this novel you will notice a November date in keeping to the Gregorian calendar.

I hope this clarifies some of the history included in this story, and, as always, I hope it encourages you to learn more for yourself. Any errors in history or setting are entirely my own. ☞

Further Reading

Nonfiction

Memoirs of a Revolutionist (1927)—Vera
Figner

*Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of
Russia* (2002)—Orlando Figes

The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police
(1981)—George Leggett

*Lady Death: The Memoirs of Stalin's
Sniper* (2018)—Lyudmila Pavlichenko

Caught in the Revolution (2016)—Helen
Rappaport

*Stalin's Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in
World War II* (2006)—Kenneth
Slepyan

Captives of Revolution (2011)—Scott B.
Smith

Fiction

I Was Anastasia (2018)—Ariel Lawhon

The Huntress (2019)—Kate Quinn

Red Mistress (2020)—Elizabeth
Blackwell


Reading Group Guide

1. Compare and contrast the women in this story: Svetlana, Vera, Fanya, and Mila. What similarities and differences do they share as young women active in their causes? How do Mila and Svetlana compare and contrast in their youth, and what changes do you find in the woman Svetlana was versus the woman Mila knows as Babushka? Do you think Fanya, Svetlana, and Vera were true friends to one another or not? How does Vera change when acting as Orlova, and does her role shift or change as her years working for the Cheka—then, as it evolved, the NKVD—progress? What similarities do you find in all these women throughout their lives? What differences?
2. Sight is a key theme and symbol utilized throughout this story: Fanya suffers from deteriorating vision, Orlova blinds her victims, and Svetlana loses her eyesight. Discuss the message this represents in relation to the choices these characters make—those related to their political views, family life, romantic interests, etc.
3. Discuss the politics in the story—the imperialism of the Old Regime, the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the Bolshevik Party, Nazi Germany, and the USSR. What did you learn about these parties and their conflicts? Do you think the Russian Revolution

resulted in a government the people wanted or expected? Discuss positive and negative outcomes of the revolution. Do you notice any similarities or differences between Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party versus Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party?

4. Svetlana falls in love with Kazimir, Mila with Daniil. Do you think these were healthy relationships? Why or why not? How do both men seem similar and differ? What do you think both women saw in their love interests? If their lives had turned out differently, do you think either relationship would have lasted? Discuss Svetlana's relationship with Sergei.
5. Mila fights her battles with poison, Svetlana with a pistol. What do these weapons and approaches say about these women?
6. One of Svetlana's most difficult decisions is her choice to place her daughter, Tatiana, in a foundling hospital for safety until the revolution is over. Do you agree this was the wisest choice, and do you think this choice was made from motherly concern, obsession with revolutionary participation, or a combination of both? How did this decision impact her emotionally and psychologically, and what effect did it have on Tatiana? How did her broken relationship with her own mother impact the way Tatiana parents Mila? ►

Reading Group Guide *(continued)*

7. What do you think family means to these characters, especially Mila, Svetlana, and Tatiana?
8. What does the novel's title, *Daughters of Victory*, mean to you? What triumphs do these characters experience? What failures? Do you feel these characters are victorious? Do you think *they* feel they are victorious? Do you think the concept of victory and what it means to them changes throughout the course of the story? 

Discover great authors, exclusive offers, and more at hc.com.