

**Tinísima**

Elena Poniatowska  
Ediciones Era  
Mexico City, 1992. 660 pp.

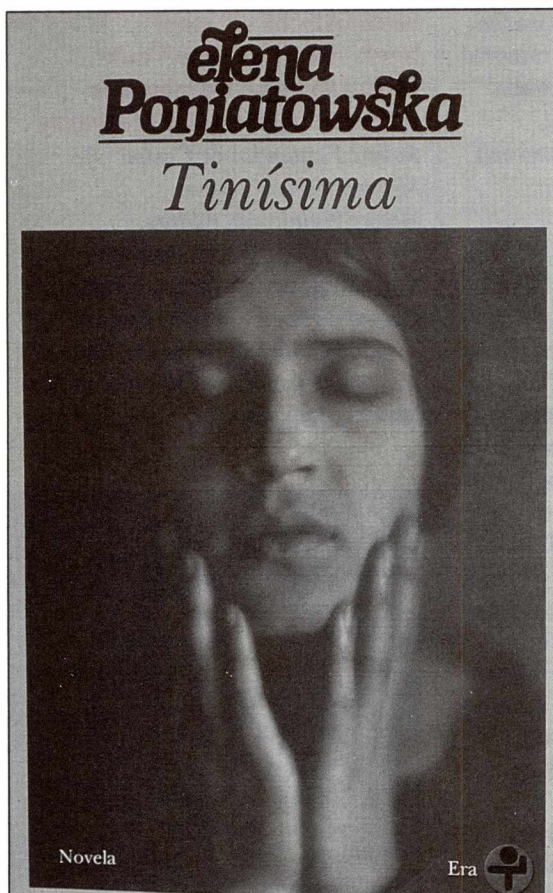
*Tinísima* is a biographical novel that tells the story of Tina Modotti (1896-1941) and her times. Modotti, already the subject of two books<sup>1</sup> and a British documentary, closely follows Frida Kahlo in the current fascination with enigmatic, creative women active in the Mexico of the 1920s. Although several scholars and journalists are still plugging away at unraveling and researching Tina's life, Elena Poniatowska, a well-known and highly respected journalist and fiction writer, hit the local best seller list with her book last winter.

Tina, an Italian immigrant to the United States, was a factory worker, movie star, photographer and active member of the Communist Party. She arrived in Mexico in 1921 with Edward Weston and one of his sons, shortly after the death of her first husband. She learned the art of photography as an apprentice to Weston while living with him.

Modotti and Weston joined the group of artists and intellectuals active in the Mexican Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> They were committed to change, to improving the worker's lot and to producing socially conscious art. When Weston returned to the United States, Tina threw herself into the activities of the Communist Party. She lived first with Xavier Guerrero, and when he left for Moscow, fell deeply in love with the Cuban Julio Mella, who worked, from Mexico, towards the overthrow of the Cuban dictator Machado.

<sup>1</sup> Constantine, Mildred, *Tina Modotti, a fragile life*. New York and London, Paddington Press, Ltd. 1975; and Hooks, Margaret, in press.

<sup>2</sup> Newhall, Nancy (ed.), *The daybooks of Edward Weston*, Volume I. Rochester, New York, George Eastman House, 1961. Beals, Carleton, "Tina Modotti," *Creative Arts*, New York, February, 1923.



Tina was known for her beauty and for her commitment to the Communist Party. She is remembered as enigmatic, sensual and caring. Modotti was embroiled in two scandals by the press in Mexico City: the first when Mella was murdered and the second when she died.

Her commitment to the Party was so complete that, although Diego Rivera helped her clear her name and regain her freedom when she was accused of killing Mella in 1927, she turned on Rivera when the Party expelled him in 1929. She was imprisoned in Mexico in 1929 and deported in 1930.

Deportation meant an immediate struggle for survival. Although her family lived in San Francisco and she could have gone to the United States, traveling there meant immediate imprisonment. The doors to Mussolini's Italy were also open, but

with the same fate awaiting her. Tina went to Berlin, where she survived<sup>3</sup> until Hitler's rise to power threatened her safety and the Party helped her get to Moscow.

Poniatowska's description of life in Moscow, working for the International, portrays a dreary life of survival. Tina's commitment is firm. She carries out dangerous missions to rescue others or travels to deliver documents and funds. It isn't easy to survive under Stalin. Fellow members are deceived, double-crossed, betrayed, some murdered from the inside. Tina's companion Vittorio Vidali is denounced, his future is uncertain. He is

sent to Spain, to collaborate with the Party during the Spanish Civil War.

Under the pseudonym of Maria, Tina joins Vidali in Spain and works tirelessly throughout the Civil War. The author dramatically weaves war, politics and woman's personal tragedy. Tina experiences the same jealousy she had provoked in Weston when Vidali sees other women. She is devastated by learning of her mother's death months after it occurred. She is worn down by caring for others, untiring until the bitter end.

The once sensual woman aged prematurely; physically and spiritually she was tired, old and burned-out when she managed to get out of Europe and return to Mexico. There is no spark, no interest in seeing her friends, no love for popular art or people who had once been the source of joy and fascination.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished letter, Anita Brenner archive.