

**Tatyana V. Bakhmetyeva. *Mother of the Church: Sofia Svechina, the Salon, and the Politics of Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century Russia and France*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press. 2016. Xii+271 pages. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00 paper.**

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Tatyana V. Bakhmetyeva's fascinating new biography of Sofia Svechina, better known to most historians as the Parisian *salonnaire* "Madame Swetchine," arrives at an opportune moment. The questions that defined Svechina's life—What does it mean to be Russian? What does it mean to be European? What is the relationship between Russia and Europe, and between Russianness and Europeaness? How can one, if at all, attend both to the needs of one's soul as a faithful subject of (Roman Catholic) Christendom and to the needs of one's mind as a creature of the Enlightenment? How does one do this, especially, when one is a female?—are as politically relevant today as they were during the years when Sofia Svechina helped shape the tenor of religious and political debate in both St. Petersburg (until 1816) and Paris (until her death in 1857). At first glance, Svechina's life seems almost completely lacking in events that might be considered conventionally dramatic in a biographical sense, with the main exceptions being Svechina's conversion to Catholicism in 1815 and subsequent decision to move with her husband to Paris, and her coerced return to Russia in 1834 to argue for her and her husband's right to remain abroad (which was granted). Yet in Bakhmetyeva's telling, Svechina's life emerges as an almost unbelievably interesting and rich one. Who was this woman, whom Alexis de Tocqueville described as embodying "the perfect combination of saintliness and genius" (1)? From whence derived the "mysterious power" that led to her achieving "such levels of admiration and devotion" (3) among the leading lights of intellectual and spiritual society in both St. Petersburg and Paris?

*Mother of the Church* finds the answers to these questions by embedding the narrative of Svechina's life in illuminating accounts of the most publicly significant relationships she fostered as a *salonnaire*. The most important of these were with the Russian Jesuit Ivan Gagarin, with the French monarchist Joseph de Maistre, with the leaders of the French Liberal Catholic movement Dominican Father Henri Lacordaire and his lay counterpart Count Charles de Montalembert, and finally, near the end of her life, with de Tocqueville. In each instance, Bakhmetyeva vividly conjures the political, intellectual, and religious atmosphere that shaped the relationship, and expertly outlines Svechina's role in both the intimate encounters themselves and the larger historical reverberations that emerged from them. Bakhmetyeva convincingly argues that Svechina was a "master of micropolitics" (132), using the (relatively) private channels of the *salon* and the relationships she cultivated there to successfully gain the "public authority" (7) that she sought. Svechina's "public authority" was arguably most significant during the 1830s and 1840s. This is when her friendships with and patronage of Lacordaire and de Montalembert (and the important mediation she did to preserve the political alliance between them) led to her assuming a major role in the "recovery" of the Liberal Catholic movement in France. Indeed, Bakhmetyeva argues that Svechina served as the "real director of consciousness" (205) for the movement. Even after her death, Svechina's influence on the movement was significant, as her many French biographers "wrote her" as a type of "Liberal Catholic saint,"

using her life to “explain, defend and popularize Liberal Catholic ideas, and to relieve some of the difficulties they faced under the Second Empire” (262-4). The biographies of “Saint Swetchine” were less well received in her *rodina* (homeland) where Over-Procurator of the Holy Synod and Minister of Education Dmitrii Tolstoi called them “posthumous Jesuit propaganda” that was “foul but clever” (266).

Sofia Svechina was born to a well-placed Russian noble family in St. Petersburg in 1782. Her father served as Catherine II’s personal secretary for a time, and Sofia herself eventually became a lady-in-waiting at the court of Paul I’s consort Empress Maria Fedorovna. As a child of such privileged circumstances, Sofia was “destined to receive a superb education” (21). Yet even among her class, Sofia evidenced a singularly “insatiable thirst for knowledge” (26). Throughout her life Svechina would exhibit an unwillingness to “abandon for the sake of propriety her intellectual curiosity and passion for learning” (29); even in the last years of her life, she “brought books with her everywhere and devoted long hours to study” (248). Sofia’s marriage to General Nikolai Sergeevich Svechin in 1776, about which she “appeared to have had little [to] say” (43), led to a long, loving, and fulfilling partnership. The significance of Svechina’s marriage in Bakhmetyeva’s account lies chiefly in its having provided the stable, prosperous, and liberal circumstances that allowed her to pursue the intellectual, spiritual, and political passions that animated the rest of her life.

Svechina’s attraction to Roman Catholicism was fostered through her relationship with de Maistre (itself cultivated in the salons of St. Petersburg). Her conversion in 1815 came only after six months of solitary, intensive study of Catholic history and theology. Svechina’s decision to convert was based ultimately on her conviction that the Roman faith was “in perfect agreement with the needs of my intelligence and my soul” (95). Bakhmetyeva sees Svechina the Catholic convert as being one of a “much larger group of people” who, like their later, most famous tribune, Petr Chaadaev, “thought that Russia’s destiny, its past, present and future, should be linked to Europe and saw Catholicism as a path to bring together two civilizations, the Russian and the European” (5). In Bakhmetyeva’s reading, Roman Catholicism helped Svechina navigate two of the many intersections that characterized her life—that of her strong intellectual bent (reason) and her spiritual craving (religion), and that of her native Russianness with her love for European (chiefly French and German) culture and philosophy. The role of *salonniere* similarly allowed Svechina to fulfill both her desire to exercise intellectual and spiritual influence and power in society and her determination not to transgress the limitations on women in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg and Paris. Along with Liberal Catholics in France, “female commentators” in particular embraced Svechina after her death as someone who managed to live a life of real intellectual, spiritual, and emotional “complexity” and seriousness in an era when that was difficult for women (265).

Bakhmetyeva’s comprehensive portrait of Sofia Svechina is first-rate intellectual history and biography, and deserves wide readership among historians of gender, Russia, France, Europe, Catholicism, and the nineteenth century. If Bakhmetyeva does not entirely solve the mystery of Svechina’s great “power over souls,” she goes a very long way toward doing so, in a most admirable way.