

Idealists, Romantics and Muses. Russian Catholic Women and Their Contribution to the Culture of Nineteenth-century Europe

Russian Catholics of the 19th century were very special and daring women. The very fact of converting to Catholicism at a time when it was banned in the Russian Empire placed them in the position of outsiders, many of whom chose to emigrate in order to be able to devote themselves to religious practices and their own intellectual development without any obstacles. Abroad, they established art salons and became artists' muses. The Moscow and later on the Roman salon of Zinaida Wołkońska was visited by: Aleksander Pushkin, Adam Mickiewicz, Eugeniusz Baratyński, Sergey Shevyrov, Piotr Chaadajew, and the Kiriejewski brothers. Sofia Swieczina's Paris salon was visited by the Russian traveling around Europe, but also by French writers and intellectuals (Montalembert, Lamartine, Fénelon, Chateaubriand, Lacordaire, Lammenais). Lacordaire called Swieczina "grande conversatrix" (great conversationalist) and admired her extraordinary mind and being well read. Pushkin described Wołkońska as "the Queen of Muses and Beauty".

Today, thanks to the works of such authors as Ivan Gagarin, Paweł Pierling, Elena Cymbajewa, Bogusław Mucha or Tatiana Bakhmetiev, we know a fairly large number of names of the women who decided to become Catholics. Apart from the aforementioned, one should mention figures such as: Aleksandra Golicyna, Jelizwieta Golicyna, Sofia Rostopczyna, Anna and Jekatierina Tolstyje, Protasov Sisters, Praskowia Gołowina, Jelizawieta Gołowina, Ekaterina Sołtykowa, Aleksandra Dietrichstein, Jekatierina Gagarina, Jekatierina. This list is by no means exhaustive. We still know very little about the participation of Russian Catholics in the culture of nineteenth-century Europe. Some of them were writers, wrote historical and linguistic dissertations, philosophical etudes (Swieczin), composed music and wrote plays and even operas (Wołkońska). After emigrating to France, Ekaterina Rostopczyna started writing fairy tales for children under the name of her husband (de Segur). Catherine de Segur concluded her first contract with the publishing house at the age of 56. History remembered her as the first female fairy tale writer in the French history, although apart from fairy tales, she also wrote other literary works, including novels (she has 20 to her credit).

A significant part of the texts by the Russian Catholic women still remains in the form of manuscripts. The fact that they had been collected by Ivan Gagarin, one of the best known Russian Catholics proves that aiming at depicting a complex picture of Russian Catholicism he intended to devote a significant part of it to women's contribution. It was the fact of primary importance as in his times the works on Russian Catholicism by authors connected with Orthodox Church, treated women's conversions to Catholicism in a very superficial way, believing these were the whims of the bored and poorly educated aristocrats, rather than their personal religious act, or a premeditated civil choice.

The aim of this project is to examine comprehensively the impact of Russian women identifying themselves or identified as Catholic on European culture. In our research, women's autobiographical and ego-documentary texts (letters, travel reports, diaries, memoirs, notes) and their original literary work (treatises on religious and philosophical themes) will be of primary importance. An extensive analysis of those documents appears to be an opportunity of a very revealing and interesting research as the names of the authors of the documents are little known, or entirely unknown.

We will strive to create the most accurate portrayal of the Russian Catholic women and revise the existing stereotypes about this socio-religious group. In the course of the research we also hope to enrich our knowledge with new names and facts reflecting the ties between the Russian Catholic women and representatives of Russian and European literature, as well as religious and political thought, and to analyse their influence on the views of representatives of the nineteenth-century intellectual elite. It is planned to publish a monograph on the Russian Catholic women of the 19th century and their place in the culture and literature on the basis of the researched materials.