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## What women and society can learn from missionary Juliane von Krüdener



Debora Sommer is a PhD graduate of Unisa who joined the university's department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology as a co-researcher. Sommer, a pastor's daughter from Switzerland, reintroduced the baroness, Juliane von Krüdener, a largely forgotten historic figure, back into historical awareness through her doctoral thesis. Research from this thesis also informed her book, *Juliane von Krüdener: Eine Baronin missioniert Europa*, published in September this year.

The month of November marks the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birthday of Juliane von Krüdener—a woman who rattled half of Europe with her missionary work. This is, therefore, a worthy time to bring this unrightfully forgotten woman back into history says Debora Sommer, a PhD graduate of Unisa, who also joined the university's department of Christian Spirituality, Church History

and Missiology as a co-researcher.

Sommer, a pastor's daughter from Switzerland, reintroduced the baroness, Von Krüdener, a largely forgotten historic figure, back into historical awareness through her doctoral thesis. She says Von Krüdener lived during the French Revolution in one of the most eventful eras of modern times, and she personally knew two of the most influential rivals of her time—the French Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Tsar Alexander I of Russia.

“The baroness lived for 60 years. The first 40 years were determined by her life as an aristocrat and her role as an ambassador's wife, mother and author. But the last 20 years were devoted to her uncompromising, missional work in Western and Eastern Europe. That she hardly found her way into history books bothered me and over the years my desire to bring her back into history grew constantly. This has been my motivation to deal with this topic in my doctoral thesis.”

Research from this doctoral thesis also informed her book, *Juliane von Krüdener: Eine Baronin missioniert Europa*, published in September this year. “While the book is completely rewritten, it is still based on the research of my doctoral thesis. However, for the book, I had to do further research, mainly in the area of daily life, customs, contemporary history, cultural and religious coherences. In the thesis there is little room for such details but in the book they are crucial in order to make history of Juliane von Krüdener come alive for the reader.”

**In the interview that follows, Sommer expands on the importance of Von Krüdener’s work, and the lessons that women and society can learn from her.**

**Q: Why is Juliane important and what can the modern woman learn from her?**

A: The modern woman can learn from Juliane that it is crucial to follow the call of your heart and not to allow restrictions or boundaries to stop you or keep you silent. Life is too short to remain in a waiting position. After a life-changing encounter with God, Juliane became a very courageous woman. Fearlessly she confronted rulers and predicted, for example, the downfall of the Bourbon monarchy and Napoleon’s return from Elba. From 1816 to 1818 she went on mission trips in Switzerland and Southern Germany. Thousands of people came together in Swiss cities to see the woman from the North, to hear what she had to say and to get help from her. Compassionate with the starving people in the brutal famine, the baroness gave her life to the suffering population. The mother of the poor did not remain silent, but reminded clerics and governments of their responsibilities and demanded a gospel seen through deeds. Clerics were suspended because of her. The police were sent to silence her. Juliane polarised families, churches, cities and cantons. When she was evicted to Russia, it was a relief to many Western Europeans. In the eyes of her contemporaries she overstepped too many socially recognised boundaries such as cultural, social, confessional, traditional, and gender borders. Although she has been criticised, defamed and even expelled, she held firm and uncompromising on her calling. Juliane was bold to stand up. To quote the latest Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai: “When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.” Women who hold firm on their calling must speak out. Women must follow their dreams even if their concerns are not accepted enthusiastically.

**Q: Your research addressed the foundational questions about the role of women in mission and church history and is a testimony to the significant contribution of women to revival-transformative processes during the 19th century. How can this impact now on the 21st century?**

A: In my opinion, historiography—in particular of church and mission history—has focused primarily on visible (and foremost male) success, such as the establishment of institutions or organisations. The tremendous influence of networking women has been almost completely neglected. When doing my research I was amazed at the scope of the networks around Juliane. Apart from Christian networks and social networks the transnational network of salon culture (best known for its literature salons) turned out to be the most important network for Juliane’s life and for many other women of her time. The very special thing is that the salons were managed and led by women, the so-called salonnières or salon ladies. The salon was a legitimate chance for women to take part in literary, political and religious life, and even to shape these creatively. Juliane’s

life shows that salon culture was not only important as a social network but also to organise religious life. Within the framework of religious salons at the beginning of the 19th century women played a key role in strategic networking for revivalist breakthroughs, institutional beginnings and missionary matters. When it comes to the impact or learnings from this story in our own times I accentuate that Juliane's life and work can be a strong reminder of or an eye-opener for church people to work in public cultures and settings. She can inspire women to enter and make use of the given space at modern social arenas and contribute actively in contemporary mission work. The religious salons have new faces but the challenges and the spaces are still there.

**Q: What were the outcomes of your interdisciplinary research on Juliane and how can this be used within this field?**

A: The very basic outcome is that Juliane should be taken seriously from theological perspective and that she really deserves a place in mission and church history books. This fundamental outcome raises a claim on the basis of a growing negative judgment in the vast majority of the literature that dealt with the baroness after her death. Following and overall negative trend many authors defamed the baroness as a religious fanatic, unworldly lunatic, ridiculous sectarist and even as a witch, seductress or victim of religious mania. Only few authors contradicted the mainstream in the last decades. My extensive doctoral thesis provides evidence that Juliane was not only a famous writer but also a serious theological and missional force and that she had notable influence on the transformative revivalist processes of her time. Many revivalist breakthroughs can be traced back to her and notable historical people were spiritually influenced by her. Juliane moved Europe as an itinerant preacher, evangelist and missionary, as a missional salon lady, theologian, author, humanitarian and social reformist. She moved Europe as a female pioneer of evangelical faith, impulse giver and networker. The case study on Juliane makes evident that male-dominated history should discover and recognise the great part women took in revivalist movements and historical transformations.

**Q: Having completed the PhD journey, what advice do you have for current and future PhD students?**

A: In retrospect and based on my personal experience, I would like to emphasise that one should be on fire for one's topic. Doing a PhD is no walk in the park. It needs the willingness to cross mental deserts and overcome hard times on your own. Don't expect other people to influence you. You need a high amount of intrinsic motivation or you will most likely be shipwrecked. So choose your topic carefully and wisely. You also need to plan your way of working according to your personal circumstances. This implies that you have to get to know you better and better. You need to find out under which conditions you will be able to give your best. And then you have to find solutions. I know that it is not always that easy, but it is crucial to find or create solutions according to your personal circumstances. It is also important to surround yourself with people who encourage and support you and avoid, as far as possible, negative and strength-sapping people. There are people who will never understand why you set out on this course. And lastly, take the chance, take it seriously, and be hard-working and goal-oriented.

*\*By Rivonia Naidu-Hoffmeester*

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Immerse yourself in the time of the French Revolution.

Discover the forgotten history of Juliane von Krüdener, an influential writer and salon lady who broke prevailing barriers in courageous way.

Based on the PhD research of Unisa graduate, Debora Sommer, this biography documents Von Krüdener's fascinating life and gives her, 250 years after her birth, her place in history.