

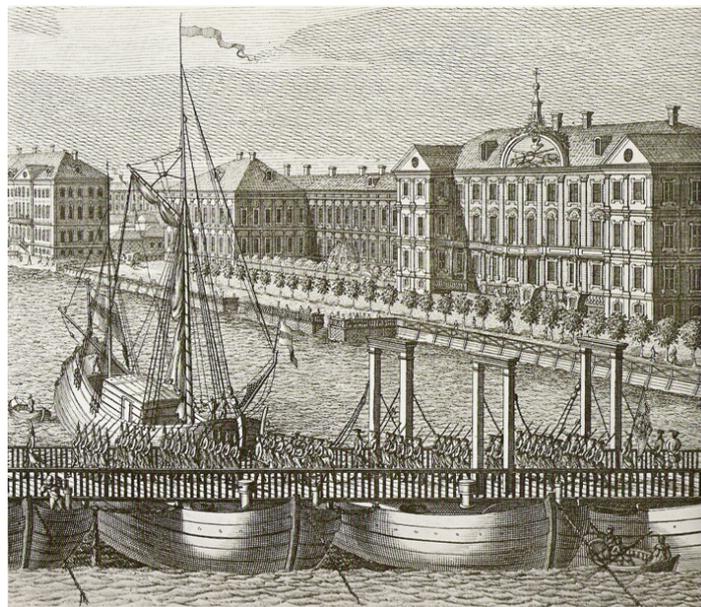
The History of the Estonian Saint John’s Church in Saint Petersburg: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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The Estonian St. John’s church in St. Petersburg became a religious, cultural and social centre not only for the Estonians in St. Petersburg but in the whole north-west of Russia. It is clear that the impulses radiating from here also reached Estonia, directly influencing the course of history. The Estonian Lutheran parish has been of great importance to many generations of Estonians since its establishment on the banks of the Neva in the second half of the 18th century, especially after the erection of the church.

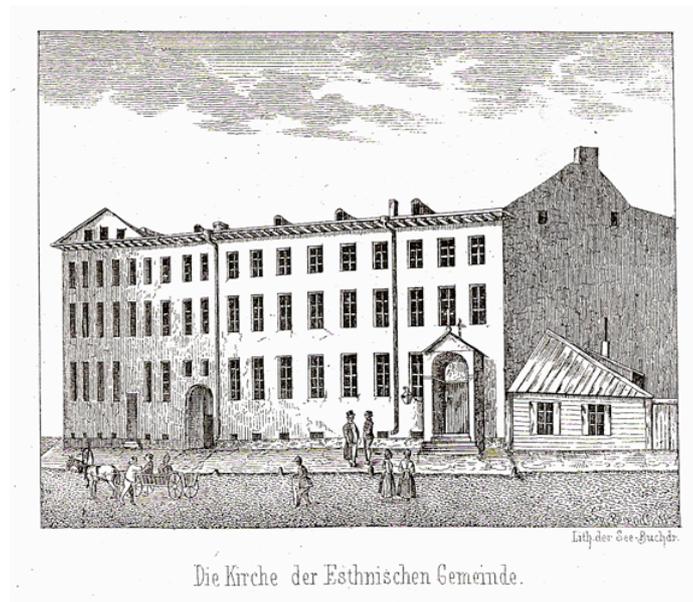
The early history of the Estonian Lutheran parish is connected with Vasilievsky Island, where a German-Latvian-Estonian Lutheran parish formed at the First Cadet Corps in the 18th century.



Engraving, “View of the Neva and the Cadet Corps” (J. Vassilyev, M. Machayev). 1753.

From the 1840s, the further development of the Estonian community after the separation from the German parish is closely connected to a rather peculiar part of Saint Petersburg –

Kolomna. It was here, in rented premises in Drovyanoy Lane, that the consecration of Saint John's church took place on the 16th of May 1843.



The Estonian Lutheran parish church. 1855. (Drovyanoy Lane)



Apparently the same building (5 Drovyanoy Lane). 2007. Photo by the author.

Saint John's church and parish buildings are today located on the corner of Kolomna-
Decembrist and Masterskaya (the previous address of the church was 54 Ofiterskaya St.,
today 54A Decembrist St.



The Saint John's church in Saint Petersburg, 54 Ofitserskaya St.(54 A Decembrist St.). Photo: The Estonian Literary Museum.



The altar in Saint John's church. Photo: The Estonian Literary Museum.

In addition to the church rooms, the Estonian parish also had a parish house, a school building and a tenement building. Saint John's church with its high clock tower was the jewel of Ofitserskaya Street and all of Kolomna.



Decembrist Street. Saint John's church to the right. 1930s. Photo: The Saint Petersburg Central State Archives of Cinema, Photographic and Phonographic Documents.

The majority of famous Estonians in the area were connected to the parish; pastors and composers (Jakob Hurt, Jakob Kukk, Johannes Kappel, Rudolf Tobias, to mention a few), but there were also thousands of regular Estonians who were members of Saint John's parish.

One could say that the history of Saint John's church mirrors the history of both the Estonian community of Saint Petersburg and the city itself with their joyous and tragic moments. During the course of the research, there was an attempt to compile a chronology of the main events up until today.

The church fulfilled its mission during the years before the revolution as well as the pre-war years until it was closed down, ravaged and rebuilt in the early 1930s.

The research into the history of Saint John's church gradually began when Saint John's parish was re-established and the Saint John's Church Foundation was started. Members of the parish and the head of the Saint John's Church Foundation Mr. Jüri Trei have been involved in this work. Simultaneously, researchers of the local history and architecture of Saint Petersburg (for instance Mr. Igor Harlamov, Mr. Viktor Antonov and Mr. Sergey Boglachov) and representatives of the *Spetsprojektrestavratsija*, were also doing research on

the same subject, using material from the Saint Petersburg archives. Some articles appeared in collections and in the Saint Petersburg encyclopedia of sacred buildings.

The Estonian researcher Mr. Raimo Pullat dedicated part of his book to Saint John's church (Pullat 2004), and used printed matter as well as archival records. Research dedicated solely to the Saint John's church in Saint Petersburg had not yet seen the light of day, and the history of the Estonian parish from its founding up until today wasn't very clear.

The material we had at our disposal when we started to delve into the history of Saint John's church was rather diverse. During the course of the research we had the opportunity to use different sources:

- 1) archival, museum and library collections;
- 2) printed sources (such as parish publications and reports) and literature;
- 3) manuscripts (such as biographies);
- 4) periodicals;
- 5) private collections (confirmation cards, photos, etc).

1. Archival, museum and library collections:

- The Estonian Film Archives
- The Estonian Literary Museum
- The Academic Library of Tallinn University (particularly the Baltica collection)
- The National Library of Estonia
- The Tartu University Library
- The Russian State Historical Archives
- The Central State Historical Archives of Saint Petersburg
- The Saint Petersburg Central State Archives of Cinema, Photographic and Phonographic Documents

There are new research possibilities at the Russian State Historical Archives, which are now located in a new building. Archival fonds are available for research from the end of January 2009. This spacious building holds fonds connected with the history of Saint

Petersburg's Estonians, their parish and their societies. The State Historical Archives have a website at <http://fgurgia.ru>, where it is quite difficult to extract information; more precise search engines can only be used at the archives. However, Internet and archival systems are being improved and updated. All archival collections are unfortunately not available for research, but the good working conditions, large reading room and friendly, helpful young staff are noteworthy.

The church records of Saint John's parish are held at the Central State Historical Archives at Pskovskaya St. in Saint Petersburg. Records from the church's history during the Soviet times can be found in the Saint Petersburg Central State Archives on Varfolomeyevskaya St.

It is important to use source material from both Estonian and Russian archives, as it makes it possible to give a more complete overview, control information, correct inaccuracies, remove inaccuracies in the descriptions of photographs, etc.

2. Printed sources (such as parish publications and reports) and literature.

Attempts at giving an historical overview of Saint John's church were made prior to the revolution, when smaller publications were printed: "*Kiriklik Leht Eesti Jaani kogudusele Peterburis*". 1884. Nr 1. Tartu; "*Peeterburi Eesti Jaani koguduse ja kiriku minewik ja praegune seisukord: Mitme wana koguduseliikme mälestused*". 1914. Peterburi. ("Church Paper for the members of the Estonian Saint John's parish of Saint Petersburg". 1884. Nr 1. Tartu; "The past and present of the Estonian Saint John's parish in Saint Petersburg: the recollections of several old parish members". Saint Petersburg 1914.)

The first publication was printed on the initiative of Jakob Hurt, but the first issue of "*Kiriklik Leht*" was also to be the last.

During the course of our research we tried to compile a register of the Estonian parish's clergymen, which is still to be completed. German sources proved useful here, as we found names and biographies of Russia's Lutheran clergymen.

In order to find out more about the authorship of Saint John's church and its surrounding buildings we had to submerge ourselves in the architectural history of Saint Petersburg. We also came across useful information in the German Lutheran parish's historical records; Saint John's church was at times also called a German-Estonian parish.

3. Manuscripts (such as biographical accounts).

Memories connected with Saint John's church and Kolomna (where many of Saint Petersburg's Estonians lived) can not only be found in Estonian sources but also in the memories of other inhabitants of Saint Petersburg, since the local Estonians constituted a part of Saint Petersburg and the everyday lives of her inhabitants. Estonian characteristics such as good upbringing, sense of responsibility, decency, economic thinking and living of their faith made deep impressions in the memories of the inhabitants of Saint Petersburg.

4. Periodicals.

Material published in periodicals add very interesting facts and nuances; for instance, a description and drawing of the church building can be found in an 1861 issue of the "*Perno Postimees*", as well as an account of the building process and the day of consecration. Thanks to this we can picture this important day in the lives of Saint Petersburg's Estonians quite well.

Quite a lot of useful information and pictures related to the church can be found in "*Olevik*", in the old "*Peterburi Teataja*", "*Pealinna Teataja*" and in "*Rahvaleht*", where L. Piirvald-Paapi's memories and photos were published in 1939. The Soviet atmosphere can be sensed in the Leningrad periodical.

Lately, new sources have appeared in the "*Peterburi Teataja*" ("The Saint Petersburg Informer") published by the Saint Petersburg Estonian Society, Saint John's Parish and Saint John's Church Foundation; these can be used by future history researchers. The publication records the life of the contemporary Estonian community.

5. Private collections.

Much interesting information can be found in private collections, for instance confirmation cards from Saint John's church and photos of confirmands.



Marie Turu's confirmation card, bearing Rudolf Kallas' signature. 1909. From the private collection of Ms. Yelena Vereshchagina.

Notes on the photographs help find out names and dates.



Postcard with the altar, facade, organ, chancel and a portrait of pastor Rudolf Kallas. 1908. From the private collection of Ms. Inga Sudakova.

Unfortunately, many private collections are still not available to us.

So far we have yet to find a single group photo of the confirmands in Saint John's church, but the Saint Petersburg photo archives have confirmation photographs from the Estonian Lutheran churches in the Leningrad Oblast; we can only hope that such photos have been preserved in private collections or Estonian émigré archives.

It happens quite frequently that people from Saint Petersburg and Estonia turn to us looking for information about relatives who were members of Saint John's parish. We can now direct these inquirers to the right information.

The bilingual publication "*Eesti Jaani kirik Peterburis*" ("The Estonian Saint John's Church in Saint Petersburg", Mahtina 2009), which was published thanks to the support of the Compatriots Programme and the Saint John's Church Foundation, is a fruit of this research work. The book gives a general historical overview of the church's history, but should be seen as only a beginning for research about the parish – during the course of the research questions arose, which are still to find their final answer, such as the original location of the church premises, the authorship of the church, parish house, the school, etc.

It also became clear that recent history is much more complicated to deal with than earlier history. The researcher must talk with people, but each person has their own view of what happened.

Estonians living in Saint Petersburg and Estonia as well as other parts of the world have shown much interest towards Saint John's church. It has also attracted the attention of researchers of local history and also ethnologists. Researchers into the history of Saint Petersburg have pointed out that Estonian sources have provided them with information that was completely new to them and also very interesting, and the opposite also applied – information from the Russian archives was not very familiar to Estonian readers. Because of this, information about Saint John's church ought to be presented in at least the Estonian and Russian languages.

The history of Saint John's church is so large-scaled that it calls for thorough supplementary research. We are just in the beginning of a process, and its continuation will take the use of archival sources in both Estonia and Russia. The accessibility and terms of use for the archival records is still quite complicated. Hopefully, Estonian émigré archives will in the future be able to provide useful information.

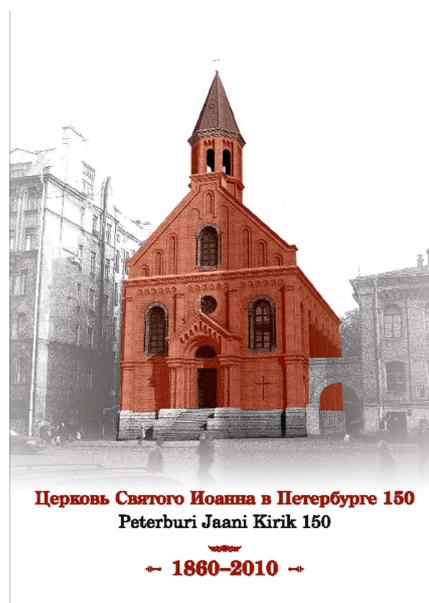
Future research will include supplementing and collecting historical records and photographic material as well as biographical data of persons connected with Saint John's

church, compiling a biographical lexicon and establishing the contemporary history of the parish.

The importance and significance of the history of Saint John's church to Saint Petersburg Estonians today is especially topical in the context of the idea of restoring the church. The restoration of Saint John's parish and church is one of the most essential tasks of the contemporary Estonian diaspora. Research on the history of Saint John's church would considerably enrich the history of both Saint Petersburg and Estonia.



The former tenement building, The Saint John's church building and former chapel. Photo by the author. 2007.



The Saint John's church restoration project. 2009.

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