

Foreign Churches in
St. Petersburg and
Their Archives, 1703–1917

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THREE HUNDRED YEARS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND RELATIONS BETWEEN CHURCHES IN ST. PETERSBURG

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Three hundred years of St. Petersburg is not an especially long period in the history of Christianity, whereas it spans almost a third of Russia's Christian history. The Jubilee encourages us to look deeper into what now is within the realm of history. St. Petersburg had its prehistory. Our city was founded 128 km to the West from the first capital of Northern Russia—Ladoga,¹ which was for the first time mentioned in the eighth century. In the ninth and tenth centuries it was one of the political centres of the Medieval Russian state. The town of Staraya Ladoga, which a month ago was celebrating its 1250th anniversary, grew from a fortress on the famous route “from the Varangians to the Greeks.”

Archaeologists say that it was here that Slavonic and Finnic tribes first met Scandinavians and other Europeans. They were craftsmen, warriors, and merchants. “Slavonic Ladoga may be called a cosmopolitan town, a town of international culture, a town where there were not any serious conflicts generated by ethnic prejudices.”²

Later, Orthodox Christianity was preached here by Novgorodian missionaries, who were backed by secular authorities. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Russians were beating back the incursions of Swedes and the Livonian Order. Historians believe that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there were 35 churches and about twenty monasteries and convents around Ladoga, Oreshek, Koporye, and Yamgorod. In 1610, the Swedes took Ladoga and Veliky Novgorod. In 1703, Russian troops captured the Swedish fortress Nienschanz, and on the Feast of Holy Trinity the City of St. Petersburg was founded nearby

¹ Since the eighteenth century the town has been called Staraya [Old] Ladoga, because in 1704 the town was transferred to the estuary of the river Volkhov and called Novaya [New] Ladoga. Parts of the rampart and stone fortress, churches from the twelfth century with frescoes, and remnants of residential quarters from the eighth to twelfth centuries have been preserved in Staraya Ladoga.

² http://www.mirtv.ru/rubrics/4/224_1.htm.

his associates created a charitable society. In 1830, when its founders left Russia, its affairs were taken over by the Anglican priest Kill, and its name was changed to "Society for the Provision of Clothes to the Poor." It existed till the middle of the 1880s.

Religious tolerance was instilled in people from childhood. For example, the Alexander Cadet Corps, patronized by the Empress, included 120 boys of three to ten years old of four confessions—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant Christians, and Muslims. They were children of the nobility, who received military training. Among the teachers of the Orthodox sovereigns some were non-Orthodox. Remarkable is the experience of the School of St. Peter (*Peterschule*), one of the oldest schools of St. Petersburg, where children of both sexes and of all classes, nationalities, and religious beliefs were educated.

The climate of trust, benevolence and religious peace and cooperation existed outside the Court and diplomatic circles as well. In the early twentieth century the great Russian saint Archpriest Ioann Sergiyev (1829–1908)—the holy and righteous John of Kronstadt—was so open to contacts with non-Orthodox Christians that today he might be called an ecumenist.²⁰ The fame of this outstanding pastor of the Russian Orthodox Church, rector of the St. Andrew Cathedral in Kronstadt, spread among the Western Christians in the end of the nineteenth century. Believers from many countries, including France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, Italy, England, Greece, and America, wrote him letters, asking for his advice or prayers. In February 1896, Russia was visited by Lord Bishop Wickelson of the Anglican Church, who spent a few days in St. Petersburg and met father John of Kronstadt. Once, accepting an invitation of the Anglican pastor Watson, father John and all his Russian and English guests prayed before their common Christian relic, the Holy Cross, and father John exclaimed: "This is the centre which brings us together; I fervently pray to our Saviour to unite the Christian Churches." Everybody replied "Amen, amen" to this invocation.

John Birkbeck, who accompanied Archbishop MacLagan of York on his visit to Russia, describes a warm welcome by father John. He was impressed by the fact that among the crowd of admirers there were German Lutherans and Tatar Muslims. For over an hour father John

²⁰ Very interesting material has been collected in Archimandrite Augustine, *Pravoslavni'i Peterburg* (see above, n. 4), from which the following information is taken.

discussed acute social problems with the archbishop. They discussed the comparative condition of the poor in England and Russia, especially in big cities. John Birkbeck says in his book that he met father John of Kronstadt on many occasions. He met English tourists who came to St. Petersburg. One of the participants of such a meeting writes, "You should have seen what attention and veneration the foreigners accorded to our beloved father if you want to understand his importance both here in Russia and abroad." Along with Christians from various European countries, pious Americans flocked to meet with and talk to father John. In 1899, Russia was visited by the American missionary Easton and the Boston writer G.W. Stebbins. They came to Kronstadt on the feast of St. Andrew, patron of St. Andrew's Cathedral, and had a chance to observe the ecclesiastical life that father John lived. After cordial greetings by the Kronstadt pastor, he showed them the House of Industry founded by himself, which left them profoundly impressed.

For a few decades in the twentieth century it was common to call Leningrad the city of three revolutions. Now, St. Petersburg may be described as a city of peace, trust, and cooperation. After the City of St. Peter regained the name received at its foundation, it would be natural to pay our attention to Russia's unique experience of religious tolerance, respect of faiths and traditions of foreigners, and spiritual pluralism possessed by St. Petersburg.

St. Petersburg—Petrograd—Leningrad—St. Petersburg

When World War I erupted in 1914, the name of St. Petersburg was changed to Petrograd, i.e., the German name was replaced by a Slavonic one for ideological reasons. This patriotically-motivated step was taken in a country where Christianity still prevailed. Even then some citizens associated the city's name with Tsar Peter rather than with the Apostle. It is quite natural, then, that under the Bolsheviks, when atheism reigned after the death of Lenin, the city was given a different name. Now, 70 years passed, and the city's original name has been restored.

The history of Christianity in Leningrad under the Soviets is ecumenical, though tragic. Persecutions rallied believers. Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran Christians, Muslims and Jews suffered alike. Non-believers suffered too, but for believers their faith was an additional reason for persecution. The ecumenical experience of suffering and martyrdom during the 1920s and 1930s is a tragic aspect of the common Christian