

# Prospects of Research into Estonians in St. Petersburg

**Veronika Mahtina**

Estonian Cultural Society in St. Petersburg

Estonians living in St. Petersburg as a consequence of historical collisions or twists of their personal fate are a research topic of great interest deserving the attention of researchers of different fields of study. Yet, neither Estonian nor Russian scholars have been too enthusiastic or steady in their interest in the topic.

The more valuable are the few studies in the field already conducted. These include the articles by M. Zassetskaya, A. Kryukov and N. Ushakov in their field work on the Estonians of the Leningrad region; the ethno-sociological works by N. Yuhneva, G. Starovoitova and A. Dridzo on the Estonians of the city and their various communities. The importance of the theatrical activities of the Estonians of St. Petersburg for the development of the Estonian theatre has been studied by V. Samoilov.

The bulkiest study on the Estonians of St. Petersburg is that by Raimo Pullat entitled “St. Petersburg, the City of Hope, and the Development of the Estonian Intelligentsia up to 1917” (“Lootuste linn Peterburi ja eesti haritlaskonna kujunemine kuni 1917”, 2004). It includes statistical data on the Estonians of the capital, material on the life of the Estonian diaspora in St. Petersburg, photos and archival data on public figures that have studied or worked here. The author convinces the reader that St. Petersburg has played a decisive role in shaping the Estonian intellectuals and this way also the further history of the Republic of Estonia.

A major contribution by the researchers of St. Petersburg in recent years is the monograph by T. Smirnova “Nationality – Petersburgian” (“Национальность – питерские”, 2002) that includes abundant factual material on the Estonian educational, social and theatrical organizations, the publication of Estonian books, the history of the Estonian press in Petrograd–Leningrad during the Soviet period.

The Estonians of the present St. Petersburg, however, have been discussed in only a few studies by Olga Kalatsheva and Liina Rootalu.

The studies on the different aspects of the Estonians of St. Petersburg present us the “keys” to a more systematic general study. Although facts on the activities of Estonians in St. Petersburg seem abundant, there is no general survey of the life of the Estonian community in the city and the specifics of its development throughout its existence.

On the one hand, the Estonian diaspora of St. Petersburg is a phenomenon of its own in the Estonian history of migration. It is sufficient to remember that it was the biggest Estonian community outside Estonia. On the other hand, the history of the Estonian community is special also for the ethnic history of the St. Petersburg region.

The history of the Estonian migration to the north-western part of Russia (the province of St. Petersburg) **prior to 1917** has been divided into various **stages of development of the “St. Petersburg group”**. The reasons, character, intensity, direction, and also the social structure of the settlers for every stage has been different.

**14<sup>th</sup> (?)–16<sup>th</sup> centuries –1744** The period of elemental migration, the “Gdov” stage

**1744–1861** The period of regulated (legal) migration. The stage of the “city diaspora”.

**1861–1906** The post-reform migration. The basic stage of formation.

**1906–1914/1917** The “Stolypin” period. (Zassetskaja 2002: 10)

**1917–1922** The period of political migration (repatriation). Sharp decrease in the number of the Estonian population. (Maamägi 1990: 200-218; Zassetskaya 1992: 135)

The most recent history of the Estonians of Leningrad–St. Petersburg can be also divided into various stages:

**1922–1950s** Abrupt decrease in the Estonian population.

**1950s–1991** Gradual decrease in the Estonian population. Estonian students at Leningrad universities.

**1991** – Continued decrease in the number of Estonian population.

So, the wave of migration with its peak in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought to the culture of the St. Petersburg region Estonian settlers of different generations and their descendants.

To define the exact number of Estonians having lived in St. Petersburg is not easy. Sometimes the figures differ even in the studies by one and the same author. Researchers observe that it is impossible to state the exact numbers for the censuses of the 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries considered also the mother tongue, and so part of the Estonians could have been classified as Germans or Russians.

The data given by R. Pullat enables us to have an idea of the fluctuations in the numbers of Estonians from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century up to 1917. His guess for the Estonian population in St. Petersburg in 1917 is 60,000 people (Pullat 2004: 44). At that time the capital had a considerable number of Estonian militaries. Raimo Raag has observed that St. Petersburg was the second largest city of the Estonian population after Tallinn (Raag 1998: 22).

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (according to the 1897 census) the province of St. Petersburg included most Estonians after the province of Livonia and Estonia – 64,116 people (Zassetskaya 1997: 52–53).

The campaign of repatriation (1920–1923) conducted by the Republic of Estonia in agreement with the Soviet authorities returned many Estonians to their homeland. During the post-war period the Estonian community decreased also in both the city and the Leningrad region. The process has been charted in Tables 1 and 2. According to the data of the 1989 census that asked for the ethnic status, there were 5,000 Estonians living in St. Petersburg.

*Table 1. Estonians in the population of Leningrad–St. Petersburg in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Smirnova 2002: 86; the data for 2002 in the Russian 2002 census at [http://www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM\\_04\\_03.xls](http://www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM_04_03.xls)).

	1970		1979		1989		2002			
	M	%	M	%	M	%	M	%		
<b>all</b>	3340	100	3987	100	4569	100	4991	100	4661	100
<b>Est</b>	7,4	0,22	6,9	0,2	6,0	0,13	5,0	0,1	2,3	0,05

**Table 2. Estonians in the population of the Leningrad region in 1939 (without Leningrad), 1959, 1989.** (Smirnova 2002: 87) and according to the **2002 census** (the 2002 Russian census at [http://www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM\\_04\\_03.xls](http://www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM_04_03.xls))

	1939		1959		1989		2002	
	M	%	M	%	M	%	M	%
<b>all</b>	3240,7	100	1245,0	100	1653,7	100	1669,2	100
<b>Est</b>	44,5	1,4	5,8	0,5	2,6	0,15	1,4	0,08

The last Russian census of October 2002 registered the nationality as identified by the people themselves. Therefore the results can be interpreted in different ways. However, two thirds of the 1.5 million people that did not identify their nationality live in Moscow, St. Petersburg or the Moscow region (<http://www.peterpis2002.ru/index.html?id=7>). People either stated or not their nationality, demonstrating this way their self-identity or its absence, or just the unwillingness to specify their ethnic status.

At the same time, the statistics shows the double decrease of the Estonian population, if compared to 1989, in both St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region. The data on the size of the population and their knowledge of Estonian is quite contradictory. Table 3 demonstrates that the number of those speaking Estonian in the Leningrad region, St. Petersburg and Moscow is greater than that of those people specifying themselves as Estonians.

*Table 3.* The number of Estonians and the knowledge of Estonian (by 2002 census; [http://www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM\\_04\\_03.xls](http://www.perepis2002.ru/ct/doc/TOM_04_03.xls); <http://www.peterpis2002.ru/ct/doc/lang.xlt>)

	Estonians	Knowledge of Estonian
Russia	28 113	26 645
Leningrad region	1 409	1 741
St-Petersburg	2 226	3 232
Moscow	1 244	1 847

There are no doubts that study of so intriguing a phenomenon as the Estonian community in St. Petersburg has to be continued aiming at both more general and systematic as well as deeper insights. A survey of the formation of the diaspora would give us an idea of the specifics of the different migration waves, the character of the Estonian diaspora and the Estonian culture in a big multinational metropolis. The multifaceted picture could be composed by studying the archival records of St. Petersburg and Estonia, complementing it by quick and active biographic study of the Estonians living in St. Petersburg at present. The work in the archives of St. Petersburg is hindered by complicated and difficult access to the records asking for time, patience and persistency, while the sociological work requires immediate mobilization of the researchers due to the advanced age of the potentially interesting informants.

The representatives of various nations living in St. Petersburg are aware of the unique character of their diaspora. With the help of the state support of their homelands, numerous studies on the Finns, Swedes, Germans, Polish, Dutch, Swiss and other nations of St.

Petersburg have been issued, also in Russian. Contemporary Estonians have been discussed in only one small booklet “Эстонцы на берегах Невы: судьбы и биографии» (2002) published in a few copies with the help of the foundation of St. John’s Church in St. Petersburg collecting the life-stories of Estonians in the city and the Leningrad region.

Worthy of research are not only those Estonians that have studied in St. Petersburg–Leningrad and returned Estonia but also those Estonians that have tied their life with the city. There are “white spots” in the portrayal of the social life of the Estonians of St. Petersburg–Petrograd–Leningrad. The years of activities of one or another society could be different, sometimes different names have been listed. Often the character, membership or the address of a society remains obscure. A more thorough study of archival records – the statutes and other publications of the societies, contemporary memoirs, their correspondence, diaries and notes – could shed light on the rich history of the social life of Estonian settlers.

An approximate list of the Estonian social organizations, including about 50 names, shows the diverse directions of the social activities of the Estonians of St. Petersburg (religion, education, sports, theatre, publication, etc) throughout its existence. Only a complex study considering the different waves of migration, the processes of the diaspora of different cultural and educational standards, could help us understand the situation of different periods. Moreover, the problem has to be treated not as an autonomous one but in its historical Estonian context, especially as St. Petersburg is a city of great relevance to the history and culture of Estonia. A synchronic view on the processes in the community of St. Petersburg and in Estonia could possibly be of great interest and exemplary value.

Special attention has to be paid to the history of the Estonian press in St. Petersburg. A list of about 60 titles gives us an idea of the diversity of the Estonian periodical publications. These include literature on education, religion, law, sports and fiction, humorous and illustrated issues, and publications of the various Estonian organizations. During the Soviet period these were the party issues that dominated together with agricultural and social journals, publications for children, young people and women.

The specifics, audience, addresses and editorial boards of all the periodical publications have not been thoroughly studied, although it is the press of the diaspora that is the major factor shaping the ethnic identity. On the one hand, it helps to stop the process of assimilation, maintaining the unity of the diaspora; on the other hand, it helps to adapt oneself to the foreign language environment.

Historical knowledge has to be viewed in its present context. The contemporary Estonian institutions of St. Petersburg have to be interpreted also fixing their role in the common historical background.

At the moment there is the Estonian Cultural Society of St. Petersburg (since 1992) with its various branches, and the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of St. John’s Church (since 1994). These bodies, with the help of the Foundation of St. John’s Church (since 1999) issue since 1999 their newspaper “Peterburi Teataja”, the follower of the publication issued in St. Petersburg since 1908 (celebrating in 2008 its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary).

The activities of these organizations shape the “modern” history of the Estonian diaspora in St. Petersburg. Unfortunately they do not have a central archive or a web-page or a library hall of their own. The only source of information, “a chronicle” of the Estonian life in the present St. Petersburg, is the “Peterburi Teataja” issued four times a year. The Estonians of St. Petersburg are willing to know more about their roots but they are not familiar with the modern search engines of the Estonian archives.

As the building of St. John's Church in St. Petersburg is being restored and often highlighted in the public, its history, like the history of the congregation has to be studied. We know only little about the Estonian schools, publishing houses, book-shops, etc of St. Petersburg. The lists of Estonians buried in the cemeteries of St. Petersburg (mostly in the Smolensk Lutheran cemetery) have to be compiled and the exact burial places specified.

It is obvious that we need to study carefully the life-stories and the documents and photo records in the state and personal archives revealing the history of Estonians in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region. But the work can be done only in collaboration with and if supported by the Estonian and Russian archives, libraries and foundations. The collection of memoirs, life-story-interviews and publication of texts is the laborious work of today in the name of the tomorrow. The perishing stories of lives and destinies – and the history of the diaspora in general – have to be fixed quickly. I would like to underline: these are not only the descendant of the Estonians in St. Petersburg that need it but the people of Estonia in general.

## References

**Засецкая М.Л.** 2002. К вопросу об истории формирования «петербургской группы» эстонцев-переселенцев (Опыт периодизации эстонской миграции). Международная научно-практическая конференция «Культура-сотрудничество: «Прекрасное ведет нас через все мосты». Тезисы конференции. Извара. 9-10 октября 2002 г. 9-13.

**Засецкая М.Л.** 1997. Система социализации у эстонцев-переселенцев Санкт-Петербургской губернии (вторая половина XIX-начало XX вв.) Из истории С.-Петербургской губернии: Новое в гуманитарных исследованиях: Сборник научных трудов. Отв. ред. О.М.Фишман. Санкт-Петербург: Издательство С.-Петербургского университета, 52-64.

**Засецкая М.Л.** 1992. Эстонцы Лужского района Ленинградской области (конца XIX – сер. XX вв.). Население Ленинградской области: Материалы и исследования по истории и традиционной культуре. Санкт-Петербург, 132-143.

**Маамяги В.А.** 1990. Эстонцы в СССР, 1917-1940 гг. Москва: Наука.

**Смирнова Т.М.** 2002. Национальность – питерские. Национальные меньшинства Петербурга и Ленинградской области в XX веке. Санкт-Петербург: Сударыня.

**Российская перепись населения 2002 г.** <http://www.perepis2002.ru>

**Pullat, R.** 2004. Lootuste linn Peterburi ja eesti haritlaskonna kujunemine kuni 1917. Tallinn: Estopol.

**Raag, R.** 1999. Eestlane väljaspool Eestit. Ajalooline ülevaade. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.

*Translated by Anne Lange*

---