

# Saint-Petersburg and Tallinn in the Work of Alexander Vladovsky: Metamorphosis of Identity\*

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**Abstract**—There are architects who are destined to play the role of a cultural bridge between countries, Alexander Ignatievich Vladovsky (1876-1950) was one of the kind. The architect made his mark both in pre-revolutionary Russia (in St. Petersburg and Narva) and in the Republic of Estonia, to where he emigrated in the early 1920s and left a significant legacy. Such a fate of an artist was not common among immigrant architects who were forced to adapt to a different culture being fully formed people already. Estonian art historian L. Gens considered A. I. Vladovsky to be the largest figure among Russian architects who ever worked in Estonia. In Russia circa the 1900s he was, to a certain extent, a representative of the new style — Art-Nouveau (Baltic Art-Nouveau or Baltic Romantic style), in Estonia - of the classic tradition considered in the Estonian professional milieu akin to conservatism. However, the works of Vladovsky in his Tallinn period had the peculiar Baltic “accent”, the fact that remained unnoticed both by his contemporaries and historians of today. Careful study of the Vladovsky’s heritage from the standpoint of cultural identity illustrates the metamorphoses of the creative approach of the artist who organically fit into the architectural and artistic context of the Baltic countries in the first half of the 20th century. This phenomenon can be viewed as an example of the creative work of talented Russian architects who ended up abroad as a result of the early twentieth century turmoil.

**Keywords**—Alexander Vladovsky; Saint-Petersburg; the Baltics; Estonia; Art-Nouveau style; academic style; identity; regionalism; adaptation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Why does it seem important to pay much attention on how the acculturation of Russian architects took place in the Baltic region of the Russian empire, and later in Russia Abroad, in the independent states, like Estonia? Their work is clearly marked with the regional architectural and artistic specifics of the Baltic States. Identifying and analyzing its features appears quite important. How did new artistic trends

\*This paper was funded by the Science and Technology Development State Program of the Russian Federation for years 2013-2020, Program of Fundamental Research of State Academies of Science for years 2013 – 2020, within Program of Fundamental Researches of Ministry of Construction, Housing and Utilities of the Russian Federation and Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences, the Research Project 1.2.23.

and local traditions influence the work of architects? How did the creative approach of the architects who constantly worked in Saint-Petersburg and Estland province become definite?

We know that the names of A. F. Bubyr and N. V. Vasiliev are firmly connected with brilliant creative achievements at the international competitions in Estland province. The grandiose construction of the Russian-Baltic shipbuilding factory and the workers' settlement in Revel (Tallinn, 1913-1917) is associated with the name of A.I. Dmitriev. These are all textbook examples. Nevertheless, A.I. Dmitriev was a purely Saint-Petersburg architect, no matter how long history linked him with Revel. So too were M. M. Lyalevich, who built a kursaal in Narva-Yisuu (1912), and G. V. Baranovsky, based on whose project Eliseev's villa in Toila Oru (1897-1901) was built.

That wasn't a case with A. I. Vladovsky, A. A. Poleshchuk (1863-1944), N. P. Opatskii (1871-1936) or A. I. Yaron (1874-1935). The latter lived in Revel from 1900 to 1919. Starting from 1908 Vladovsky himself was a two-city person living in Saint-Petersburg and Kreenholm, a village near Narva in the Estland province, where he was the leading architect of the Kreenholm manufactory. In the early 1920s he immigrated to the Republic of Estonia for good and lived in Tallinn until the end of his life. A.I. Vladovsky and A.I. Yaron, who made their careers back in the imperial period, can be referred as the “Baltic Russians”<sup>1</sup>. They were in a completely different cultural situation comparing to the Petersburgians who had been on short visits in Estonia. They, graduates of the Saint-Petersburg architectural schools, by the very circumstances of life were given the opportunity to experience the “belle époque” — the Baltic national romantic style. They worked in the atmosphere of this new artistic phenomenon grasping its rich authentic national-cultural origins and ideas. For them, the “Baltic motif” by definition could not have been only an externally implemented style, completely alien in spirit to national or regional identity [1].

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, the term “Baltic Russians” usually refers to the Russian descendants long living on the territory of the Eastern Baltic, a classic example here is Artemy Alexandrovich Poleshchuk, who was born in Estonia and therefore can be considered a repatriate.

Answering the question posed at the beginning of the article, we can make further comment: the relevance of the issue has recently increased with the problem of preserving the Russian (along with the Polish, Jewish and national-local) heritage in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, inasmuch as it constituted the common culture of these countries as a whole too. The article aims to present the legacy created by the Russians in Baltic countries as a part of the cultural tradition inherent to the Russian community of the Baltics [2].

## II. PROBLEMS OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Alexander Ignatievich Vladovsky (Born on March 10, 1876 in Saint-Petersburg — deceased on October 4, 1950 in Tallinn) was the largest figure among Russian architects who worked in Estonia in the first half of the twentieth century and had a direct impact on the development of a young Estonian architecture. In the context of the present article it seems important to analyze the Vladovsky's work from the point of view of manifestation in it of the artistic identity in different stages of the master's life - in Saint-Petersburg, Narva, or in Tallinn, as well as its organic, sometimes unconscious, adaptation to the local Baltic identity. Strange as it may seem, this fact has never been completely recognized by the Estonian historians of architecture, although one cannot say that the Vladovsky's legacy was deprived of their interest. In their works there is no doubt of the existence of the Saint-Petersburg academic school's influence on the Estonian architecture (although never in the opposite direction), and the names of A.I. Vladovsky and K. Buman (German by origin, graduate of the Imperial Academy of Arts) are usually given first [3, 4]. At the same time, Estonian authors recognized that a number of Russian architects were actively trying to fit into the local "representative" traditionalism of the 1930s, yet the difference of the initial positions, in their opinion, made the work of the Russians noticeable to others. The well-known Estonian critic Leo Gens who in his studies on Estonian architecture and the place of the Saint-Petersburg school in it a quarter of a century ago considered Vladovsky to be one of the most prominent representative of this movement and the leader among local Russian architects (e.g. A. Podchekaev, A. Poleshchuk, V. Radlov, B. Chernov, V. Tretyakevich) who influenced them greatly. However, he justly noted that "in the second half of the 1930s when "representative" traditionalism, encouraged by the authorities, spreads in Estonia, Vladovsky's work organically fits into the overall picture of the Estonian architecture" [5]. The other authors, Vladovsky's contemporaries, for example H. Kompus, came to conclusion that in the Estonian architectural art of the 1920s there were mainly two trends: "on the one hand, adherents of the local peculiar principles of form-shaping (young Estonian architects — S.L.); on the other hand, the rootless international academicians, among which optants (repatriates — S.L.) and Russian emigrants who played a particularly prominent role" while "luxurious and pretentious Saint-Petersburg" is mostly represented in the works of Vladovsky. [6] More objective assessment of the Alexander Vladovsky's role as the most competent architect of the classic style in Estonia of that time who had unique

professional signature is given in the modern Estonian researches [7].

Until recent times the heritage of A. I. Vladovsky was completely outside of the systematic attention of Russian architectural historians, while his name can be found in all major dictionaries and reference books published in Estonia by "Russian Estonians", where he is presented as a prominent public figure, cultural activist, and journalist [8]. There is no proper art analysis in such publications, as in the fundamental Russian dictionaries on art and architecture of the Russian Diasporas abroad [9]. Perhaps the first fundamental monograph about the work of Alexander Vladovsky was issued in 2018 by A.Y. Ponamarev [10]. It for the first time collected all the graphical and publicistic heritage of the architect, which certainly allowed the present research to investigate the Vladovsky's legacy in depth and to emphasize the organic nature of his creative style within the local artistic tradition of the 1930s Estonian architecture.<sup>2</sup>

## III. SAINT-PETERSBURG AND ESTONIA: BALTIC "ACCENT"

The ancestors of Alexander Ignatievich Vladovsky were noblemen of an old Polish family, participants of a number of Polish uprisings. Despite the fact that Vladovsky's father Ignat Ignatievich was a Pole and a Roman Catholic, the future architect was baptized into Orthodoxy. In 1896 - 1903 he studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts under Leon Benois. In 1903 he received a degree of an artist-architect. In 1905-1906 Vladovsky traversed the Western Europe. In 1907-1910 he served in the Office of the Institutions of the Empress Maria.

The creative life of the architect is divided into three rather unequal periods: Saint-Petersburg period, 1901-1908, was the shortest; Saint-Petersburg and Narva period, 1908-1920s; Tallinn stage was the longest, early 1920s – 1950.

The most famous realized projects of the young Vladovsky in Saint-Petersburg were the private residence of N.V. Bezobrazova (34 Mokhovaya street, built in 1902-1904, designed by A.I. Vladovsky, Y.Y. Benois and K.I. Stregulin), revenue house of the Commercial School, so-called "House with an Angel" (32 Malyy Avenue P.s., built in 1907-1908), and revenue house of O.P. Kmit (11 Blokhin street, 1909). All three above mentioned buildings are the representatives of one or another version of the Art-Nouveau style, but in the context of the present research, the revenue house of the Commercial School executed in the Northern Art-Nouveau is of particular interest, in which the Saint-Petersburg classicist tradition clearly manifests itself here. This was the first major independent work of the architect, which, with its peculiar compositional techniques, served as the basis for subsequent projects of his in the style (for example, revenue house of A.T. Munst, 1911, or design project for the

<sup>2</sup> In 2017 the author made a presentation titled "Baltic accent" in the works of Alexander Vladovsky during the Estonian period, 1908-1930s at the conference "Architecture and urban planning in the Baltic region from Modern style to the present times" in St. Petersburg. The report has not been published.

competition on the hotel in Saint-Petersburg at the Isaakiyevskaya Square, 1909).

However the Baltic theme in the Vladovsky's work began not from the revenue house of the Commercial school, but from small country wooden buildings which Alexander Vladovsky designed while he was still studying in the Academy of Arts in 1902. For instance, a competitive draft design for a country house in the Norwegian style (not executed) and brilliant, one might say, "Souvenir" — like examples of the so-called dragon-style buildings bath-houses for the "Peschanka" estate of F.M. von Kruse on the Oredezh river. Their architecture speaks of admiration for Norwegian exoticism, which seems quite appropriate for the outskirts of the northern capital as far as both the customer and the architect were concerned. This kind of commissions gives the creative freedom for an artist, the opportunity to freely express his imagination. Naturally, such uncommon and architecturally bright structures attracted attention. "On the steep sandy coast of the Oredezh River in the forest there is an estate with the owner's mansion, which is of great artistic value in terms of architecture. Particularly remarkable are the facades, the house of the matured Old Russian style with remarkable architectural lines, intricate towers and passages. The rest of the outbuildings have been executed in the same style". [11] ("Fig. 1")



Fig. 1. "Peschanka" estate. Bathhouse. Photograph from 1902.

Without taking into account the conclusions of some authors concerning the Old Russian style of outbuildings (it is not uncommon that contemporaries, even professionals, assessed the style inaccurately in retrospect), it seems relevant to emphasize the enthusiastic acceptance of this exoticism by the Russian community. This particular example of the Norwegian style was not the only one in Saint-Petersburg. A number of architects tried to create in similar fashion: S.A. Brzhozovsky (pavilions for the Moscow-Vindava-Rybinsk railway), E.V. Rokitsky (G. Olshamovsky's country residence in Vyritsa), V. K. Lukomsky (design project for a country house) and others.

Along with the buildings of the Norwegian style, in 1900-s Alexander Vladovsky designs in many different ways: in Russian, Neo-Russian, "French", neo-classicism, New Empire style, and Gothic Revival, in one word - in variety of

different styles, and that can be explained by the synergy of that era.

An outstanding building of the Saint-Petersburg and Narva period was the hospital for workers of the Kreenholm Manufactory. It was built in honor of the 300th anniversary of the House of Romanov in 1913, although there is no national content in the architecture of the facades with a small exception of the coat of arms of the Russian Empire and the inscription in a frieze honoring the major event. Leaving aside the analysis of highly technological plans and facilities' equipment (special window transom, tiling, etc.), which made this building well-known even outside Narva, the Neo-Baroque nature of architecture of the main facade should be emphasized above all. Its rich plasticity provides the building with splendid expressiveness accentuated under certain light during the day, although bearing clear symmetry and rationality in its composition ("Fig. 2"). Nonetheless, the Baltic "accent" in the architecture of the main facade can be detected as well: it is in the usage of local materials, monumental lanterns flanking the main entrance, glass patterns of the front door, stair railings, and the lighting fixtures in the interiors ("Fig. 3"). Thus, no Russian style can be found in the building commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Russian dynasty's rule!



Fig. 2. Hospital of the Kreenholm Manufactory, 1913. The main facade. Photoed by the author, 2014.

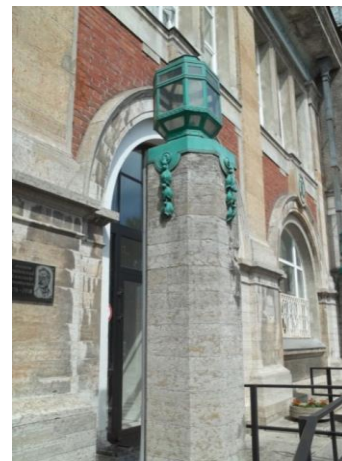


Fig. 3. Lantern in front of the main entrance of the Kreenholm Manufactory, 1913. Photoed by the author, 2014.



Not for the first time there is a reasonable doubt in the notion of the widespread “planting” of the Russian style onto the limitrophe states. In fact, Estonian critics have considered the national revival style (so-called Russian or Neo-Russian) on par with “Saint-Petersburg academicism” (a combination of outdated details of Palladian architecture) belonging to the Russian culture.

A sophisticated example of the “Baltic theme” in a series of works by Alexander Vladovsky was the complex of buildings in the village of Narva's Hydroelectric Station (designed in 1921). The people's house and residential houses for the station's management resemble Swedish architecture of the turn of the XIX - XX centuries and its upgraded version of the northern classicism. This project was not executed, although the power plant complex in Ellamaa, between Tallinn and Haapsalu, was built in 1923. Of a particular interest to us is the timber house for the management of the workers' village in Ellamaa with its traditionally high attic, octahedral windows, facade covered with a row of thin, vertical slats, white elements contrasting with the dark coloring of the walls. This particular example resembles Finnish version of the National romantic architecture and the works of Lars Sonck (“Fig. 4”).



Fig. 4. House of the Hydroelectric Station's management in Ellamaa, 1923.

<sup>a1</sup> Source: Ponamarev A.Y., Architect and artist Alexander Vladovsky: materials to the creative biography (Arkhitektorkhudozhnik Aleksandr Vladovskii: materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii). Moscow, 2018. p 162.

Several buildings by A.I. Vladovsky in his Tallinn period have become excellent examples of the Baltic Art-Deco architecture of the 1930s. L. Gens stressed that there was no architect in the Republic of Estonia who worked more successfully in this particular style. One of the examples here is the revenue house of E. Pool on the 4 Valley Street (1925). The main facade is designed in the Art-Deco fashion, while the rear elevation facing the Old Town is executed quite simply and expressively at the same time. Here Vladovsky designed a 5-storey staircase in the form of a semicircular tower, crowned with a conical roof with a weather vane. Thereby, the author managed to create an image of a stern medieval castle with only simple means of architecture. The composition of the house also included the old Hinke fortress tower, carefully preserved by the architect.

In this context it seems suitable to mention Vladovsky's restoration project of “Tolstaia Margarita” (1924) and his last realized project - the office building “Thermohydraulics” on the 27 Lai Street of 1945. According to M. Kalm, the “Thermohydraulics” building was executed rather in fashion of the “international Gothic revival” movement, and not the

“local provincial Gothic with its truly gloomy northern character.” And Vladovsky, being “a bona-fide academic”, naturally chose the former to the latter [12]. It feels like Vladovsky's aim was to fit into the urban fabric of the Old Town, which he clearly was able to achieve.

Several wooden houses designed by him belong to the so-called Estonian traditionalism style: E. Weidemann's house on 55 Narvskoye shosse (1928), residential building on 6 Yakobsoni Street (1928). According to Estonian critics, academicism was a counterbalance to the Estonian traditionalism, but, as we can see, A.I. Vladovsky could work contextually in different urban situations. Typical “Tallinn's” house of the 1920s - 1940s was a simple ordinary wooden structure. They were built in the suburbs of Tallinn, including the poor Kalamaja district. Vladovskiy mastered this type of architecture as well: his residential building on 5 Kalevi Street (1928) was an illustrative example of such a “Tallinn's” house (“Fig. 5”).



Fig. 5. Design project of the residential building on 5, Kalevi street, 1928.

<sup>a1</sup> Source: Ponamarev A.Y., Architect and artist Alexander Vladovsky: materials to the creative biography (Arkhitektorkhudozhnik Aleksandr Vladovskii: materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii). Moscow, 2018. p 204.

Characteristic of the Tallinn residential architecture at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s was the so-called “Pre-Functionalism” style. Vladovsky designed in this style as well, e.g. the buildings on 7 and 11, Weizenberg street (1929 and 1932 respectively). Even a non-exhaustive listing of the Vladovsky's realized residential buildings of this period shows how successfully the architect adapted to the current realities of the architectural life of the young Estonian Republic's capital.

Within the framework of the research it is necessary to look at the Orthodox and Lutheran temple building of Vladovsky. He paid special attention to this sphere of creative work, which was also reflected in his publications of the late 1930s [12]. In addition to the churches executed in the national-Russian style, including ones in the traditions of the Russian North (e.g. design project of the Church of St. John in Nõmme, 22), the chapel of St. George in Kopli (1936) deserves special attention. Its walls are artistically rendered with big boulders in order to achieve vivid visual effect. This was an echo of the local tradition, which was widespread both in Estonia and in the neighboring Pskov province of Russia. Alexander Vladovsky tried to find an effective solution while designing the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas in Kopli on the carcass of a fire barn (1935): high pitched roofs, half-timbered structures, trapezoid-shaped windows typical of the Baltic romantic style, tiny square

windows on almost blank facade (akin to the image of a northern house) give this church an elusive Estonian image. Maybe Vladovsky already became so accustomed to the local culture at that time that he did not even notice these creative metamorphoses of his work? ("Fig. 6")



Fig. 6. Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas in Kopli, 1935. Photograph from the 1930s.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A.I. Vladovsky made his mark both in pre-revolutionary Russia (in Saint-Petersburg and Narva) and in the Republic of Estonia, to where he emigrated in the early 1920s and where he left a significant legacy. Such a fate of an artist was not common among immigrant architects who were forced in their adulthood to adapt to a different culture.

Remaining by nature a very Russian person who was brought up by the Saint-Petersburg academic school of architecture, A. I. Vladovsky and other major architects formed the traditions of the Estonian national architectural school, which equally belong to Russian and Estonian cultures. Now it is recognized in the Estonian historiography of architecture as well.

Until recently the Baltic motif of the Vladovsky's works has not been mentioned in the studies on the architect's heritage. A. I. Vladovsky was a major representative of the Russian culture in Estonia, he defended its values, and his initiatives for the launching of the Russian art school are known, as a result he was often criticized as a Russophile. He took an active part in the construction of Tallinn in the 1920s - 1930s, while he was seen as the acolyte of academism - a "conservative" stylistic phenomenon, "not allowing the young Estonian Republic to develop." The actual fact is that the "Baltic character" became so ingrained in his artistic style that local features of his many works were simply not noticed. However today, fully understanding the general context of the artistic integrity of the architecture of the Baltic region and having a complete factual material of the Vladovsky's work, this "Baltic character" is quite easily identifiable.

Careful study of the Vladovsky's heritage from the standpoint of cultural identity illustrates the metamorphoses of the creative approach of the artist who organically fit into the architectural and artistic context of the Baltics in the first half of the 20th century. This phenomenon can be viewed as

an example of the creative work of talented Russian architects who ended up abroad as a result of the early twentieth century turmoil.

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