

# Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in Saint-Petersburg and the Concept of National Revival in the Late XIX Century Russian Architecture\*

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**Abstract**—The Russian Revival style occupied a prominent place in the architecture of the XIX century Russia. The style had gone through several stages in its development. In the early 1880s followers of the Russian Revival turned their attention to the heritage of Moscow and Yaroslavl architecture of the XVII century. On this historical basis the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ (Church of the Savior on Blood) was designed and built at the site of the murder of Emperor Alexander II. The author of the Cathedral, architect Alfred Parland, consistently implemented the concept of national revival suggesting continuation of the original style of the XVII century Russian architecture.

**Keywords**—*Russian style; national revival; Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ; the architect Alfred Parland*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The revival style was one of the leading trends in Russian architecture during the era of historicism. This phenomenon was determined by the desire to create some kind of a national architecture different from the common European styles. In addition, it was contrasted to the architecture of the XVIII-XIX centuries: baroque, classicism and the Empire style.

The foundation for the methods and forms of national revival was found in Ancient architecture of Russia, the development of which was interrupted at the beginning of the XVIII century as a result of familiarizing Russia with the Western culture. National folk art served as a carrier of ethnic identity as well at the time being. The church building was a core line of the national revival art. In the architectural images inspired by Ancient Rus the deep traditions of Orthodoxy were embodied. A church was the main motif of the Russian Revival. Neo-Byzantine style was also in high demand in church architecture for it expressed the succession

of Russian Orthodoxy from Byzantium.

The national revival movement originated in Russia in the first decades of the XIX century and existed in various versions until the 1910s. Ideologically, the Russian style was intended to reflect the validity of a special historical path of Russia. Its genesis is associated with the romantic stylization that has replaced classicism. The Russian style can be considered as a product of the Saint-Petersburg architectural school, although in Saint-Petersburg, in contrast to Moscow, it did not have the apt roots.

The early experiments in the national revival approach belonged to Carlo Rossi, Auguste de Montferrand, and Vasily Stasov. Following them, Konstantin Ton came to the fore. It is he who later played the role of the founder and leader of the Russian style. While the emperor Nicholas I himself was the main benefactor of the national church architecture.

In the early 1830s K.A. Ton created the series of projects for churches in Saint-Petersburg and its suburbs, as well as the grandiose Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The type of five-domed cross-in-square structures chosen by him ascended to Moscow cathedrals of the XV-XVI centuries. These projects became the exemplary ones, in accordance with them churches were erected throughout the entire territory of Russia. Konstantin Ton's style in turn became almost canonical. Later the architect used the forms of Russian hipped-roofed churches of the XVI-XVII centuries and it reflected an increase in the general appeal for identity.

The Konstantin Ton's projects were defined as the examples of "Russian-Byzantine style." This was explained by the idea of the Byzantine origins of Orthodox architecture with its characteristic cross-domed churches. Meanwhile, the Ton's work was mainly based on the domestic examples and did not bear particular Byzantine features. The developed by him version of the Russian style should be defined as "officially academic" (officially-because of ideological orientation, academic-because of the methods of prototypes interpretation).

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Another path of the national research in architecture was the work of A.M. Gornostaev. He also referred to the Byzantine heritage, but in his later church buildings of the 1850-s-1860-s- variations of the Russian “uzorochoye” architecture of the XVII century clearly manifested themselves. Contemporaries found in them the embodiment of the distinctive features of Russian architecture devoid of the official style of K.A. Ton.

In the establishment of the Byzantine style in the middle of the XIX century the decisive role was played by the research work and projects of D.I. Grimm.

During the reign of Alexander II, the following lines of Orthodox church-building developed: the ones by Ton, Gornostaev, and Grimm. Often the forms of Ancient Russian architecture were combined with Byzantine and even Romanesque. The folklore version of the Russian style, which continued the traditions of folk art, was greatly developed as well. At the head of this direction were V.A. Hartman and I.P. Ropet.

Strengthening the ideas of pan-slavism contributed to the flourishing of the Byzantine style, which reached its peak by the beginning of the 1880s. Its spreading was vividly expressed in the first round of competition for the Cathedral at the site where Tsar Alexander II was mortally wounded on March 1, 1881. Following the instructions of Alexander III the participants of the second round in 1882 turned their attention to the legacy of XVII century Moscow and Yaroslavl architecture [1]. That was a turning point in the evolution of the national revival. The Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ (Church of the Savior on Blood), erected at the memorial site in 1883-1907 by architect A.A. Parland, became a key project of the late Russian revival style.

## II. CREATION OF THE CATHEDRAL OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST (CHURCH OF THE SAVIOR ON BLOOD)

The projects for the memorial church awarded at the first round of competition in 1881 were rejected by Alexander III because their Byzantine forms, according to the emperor, did not correspond with the nature of “Russian church architecture.” Furthermore, he expressed the wish “that the cathedral should be built in the purely Russian taste of the XVII century, examples of which can be found, for example, in Yaroslavl”, and that “the exact place where Emperor Alexander II was mortally wounded should be located inside the church itself as a special aisle” [2]. The architects reoriented themselves with a surprising speed following the will of Alexander III in the execution of entry works for the second round of competition in the spring of 1882. However, this sudden change was not inspired only from above. At the turn of the 1870-s and 1880-s in architectural circles matured the view that the Ancient Russian architecture freed itself from Byzantine and Italian influences and reached its full independence in the XVII century.

The projects provided in 1882 by the future author of the Cathedral, Alfred Alexandrovich Parland (1842-1920),

unlike other entries, were not entirely within the guidelines of the competition. One of them was developed together with Archimandrite Ignatyi (I.V. Malyshev) who had studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts. It was the project that the emperor chose “mainly due to the peculiarities of the design of the king’s mortal wound site” [3]. Subsequently, the joint project was radically modified by A.A. Parland who should be considered the sole author of the eventually executed building. Gradually, the architect crystallized the image of the building designed in the forms of Moscow and Yaroslavl architecture. The final draft was approved in 1887 (“Fig. 1”).



Fig. 1. A.A. Parland and Archimandrite Ignatyi (The entry design for the cathedral on the site of the mortal wound of Alexander II. Elevation, 1882.)

A groundbreaking ceremony held in 1883. Its foundation was built on a solid concrete base. In 1893 the vaults started to be erected. On July 6, 1897 the ceremonial raising of the main cross took place. Cladding of the facades was made of Estland marble and ornamented brick. Polychrome domes were made at the factory of A.M. Postnikov, the tiles at the factory of M.V. Kharlamov.



Fig. 2. A.A. Parland standing near the model of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, circa 1890s.

The interior of the cathedral was distinguished by exceptional richness: different types of stones and gemstones were used. The best Russian and Italian factories participated in its creation. The marble floor and marble iconostasis were ordered in Genoa. Above the memorial site where Alexander II was wounded a canopy made of jasper, or lets, agate, jade and topaz was installed (“Fig. 2”).

The Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ stands out for its unique mosaic decoration, which has been a prominent part of its ideological and creative program. If in the outside the mosaic is included solely in the main compositional units, in the inside it entirely covers the walls, pylons, arches and domes (with the total area of about seven thousand square meters). Mosaics were created according to the picturesque drafts made by a large group of artists. An important place in this collection is occupied by compositions by M.V. Nesterov, A.P. Ryabushkin, N.N. Kharlamov, V.M. Vasnetsov, N.A. Koshelev, A.F. Afanasyev, and V.V. Belyaev. Such a large-scale work of translating the oil paintings into mosaic was performed by the Frolovs' private workshop. They were the first in Russia to master the reverse (a.k.a. Venetian) method of assembling mosaic, revealing the specific decorative capabilities of the material and technology.

On August 19, 1907, almost a quarter of a century after the start of the construction, the cathedral was consecrated in the presence of the emperor Nicholas II. All the means of art and architecture here were aimed to embody the main idea of the Alexander II memorial, which had grown into a symbol of the unity of autocracy and Orthodoxy. The spiritual, ideological essence of the monumental cathedral is inextricably linked with the concept of the national revival embodied in its architecture.

### III. THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL REVIVAL BY A.A. PARLAND

In 1881, when the first competition for the future cathedral was held, architect N.V. Sultanov in his article under the title “Revival of the Russian Art” wrote: “this Moscow-Russian style reaches its greatest, although far from complete, development in the XVII century and gives us examples of independent Russian art” [4]. This opinion was shared by other champions of the national revival trend. The highest stage in the development of the Russian national architecture was forcibly interrupted by the reforms of Peter I, followed by a century and a half period of imitation to the West. The notion of some sort of incompleteness in development of the Russian architecture in the XVII century opened the possibility of its further evolution in the XIX. From these premises the specific program of national revival was logically deduced. The main idea behind it was in continuation of the peculiar Russian style precisely from the stage at which its path was cut short, that is, from the middle to the second half of the XVII century, breaking the gap of two centuries.

As it has been noted, A.A. Parland while participating in the second round of competition in 1882 was not yet a disciple of this concept, but after that he acted as its lead follower. Developing the project “by orders of His Majesty in the style of the times of the Moscow tsars of the XVII century” [5], the architect justified the choice of sources by consciously returning to the most distinctive layer in the heritage of Russian architecture. Brought up on antiquity, although considered himself to be a follower of K.A. Ton, a student of D.I. Grimm, and a successor of A.M. Gornostaev, Alfred Parland believed that the Ancient Russian architecture developing “freely, without extraneous pressures” reached its prime in the middle-second half of the XVII century; however, Peter’s transformation put an end to the uniqueness of the national Russian architecture. Proceeding from this postulate, he saw his task in selecting “typically Russian colors, representing the final phase of the Russian style of the XVII century, as it was,” and then in their further development “that would give the impression of a natural continuation of an interrupted national movement in art” [6].

The desire for a “natural continuation” was a priori declarative. With a sincere desire to “perceive not only with the mind but also with the heart” the works of the architects of that time, “to understand the secret of their work” [7] Parland could not break the framework of the compilative method of eclecticism with its primacy of analytical principle over synthetic one. The author of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ could have endorsed in their entirety the words by N.V. Sultanov: “The whole form will be Russian if its elements are Russian...” [8]. This formula accurately discloses the prevailing principles of morphogenesis of the style.

Creating a collective image of a Russian Orthodox Church, Alfred Parland formed a sort of a scholarly anthology of church architecture of the XVII century. And although in his words “there no exact copies and repetitions of the existing in the Cathedral of the Resurrection can be

found” [9], in fact, the composition of the building is permeated with architectural quotes. Moreover, in order to achieve the unconditional recognition of national features, the architect sought to historical accuracy of all the elements.



Fig. 3. General view of Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ.

Almost all the elements of the volumetric composition and decorative details are transferred from the XVII century buildings of Moscow and Yaroslavl. Decorative brick cladding and relief pattern of surfaces of the walls were principal expressive means of the Russian architecture of that time. Light tholobates were essential to the Yaroslavl churches, and they inspired the introduction of a false gallery and the shape of the lessens with tiles to the cathedral. The domes finishing reminds of the Trinity Church at Nikitniki in Moscow. The decoration of the entrances appears to be a combination of Moscow and Yaroslavl-types porches. The intricate pattern of window casings reproduces the details of the Moscow Nativitychurch at Putinki, church of St. Nicholasat Khamovniki and Trinity church at Ostankino. Alfred Parland considered large “pediment kokoshniki” of the northern and southern facades and exterior finishing of the main apse to be the new techniques resolved “in the spirit of the required epoch.” But this particular form of kokoshniki clearly goes back to the type of “barrel” roofing, and tall windows with long columns on the central apse can be found on the churches near Moscow at Taininskoe and Alekseevskoe (see “Fig. 3”).

Alfred Parland also augmented the traditional type of the five-domed four-column church with a central 81 meters high tented roof. The bell tower was placed above the site where Tsar Alexander II was fatally wounded; but its main volume crowned with a dome was closely connected to the main body of the cathedral.

The assumption of Parland imitating the famous mid XVI century St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow (Pokrovsky Cathedral) is deeply mistaken [10]. Firstly, these buildings are completely different in their structure. The shape of the

tented roof of the Resurrection cathedral is much closer to the Nativity church’s at Putinki, and different elements of the domes have other analogues as well. Secondly, matching these two great churches conflicts with the concept of the Russian revival oriented to the architecture of the XVII century. It is true though that A.A. Parland mentioned the St. Basil’s Cathedral as an exemplary monument among the “outstanding examples of the times of the Moscow tsars of the XVII century”, clearly neglecting chronology [11].



Fig. 4. Details of Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ.

In accordance with the tastes of the late eclecticism Parland selected the richest and most complex elements from primary sources. Saturated decorativeness corresponded with his idea of the peculiarity of the XVII century Russian architecture manifested itself primarily “in the original elaboration of details and especially in ornamentation” [12]. The architect exaggerated the impression of the peculiarity by condensing typical features of the “uzorochny” style. At the same time, being a representative of the academic school, he sought to bring these forms closer to the “perfection” devoting to compulsory symmetry, regularity, and emphasizing details. That is why Parland’s masterpiece is devoid of soft plasticity and natural collection of forms typical to the Ancient Russian architecture.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The creation of the Cathedral of the Resurrection had a profound impact even during the stage of designing. First of all, it was explained by its special ideological significance. For the Russian revival style’s evolution the turn towards the legacy of the XVII century Russian architecture had fundamental meaning. The concept of the national revival consistently implemented by A.A. Parland became the determining factor for the church building of the late XIX century and the early 1900s. N.V. Sultanov, M.T.

Preobrazhensky, A.I. von Hohen, V.A. Kosyakov, and G.D. Grimm worked within the same framework. The Saint-Petersburg diocesan architect N.N. Nikonov was a faithful supporter of the traditions of the XVII century as well. This version of the Russian style overshadowed its other modifications.

However, by the time of the consecration of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ in 1907 it already happened to be an artistic anachronism. In the architecture of the turn of the XIX-XX centuries cardinal changes took place. Along with the rapid development of the new style, Art Nouveau, the attitude towards the historical heritage changed. Proponents of the national revival started to move from the meticulous quotation and decorative saturation to free stylization, generalization, and terseness of forms. The greater attention was now attracted not to the monuments of the XVII century, but to more ancient architecture of Novgorod and Pskov. The version of the national architecture of the 1900s received the title "Neo-Russian style".

The work of A.A. Parland was met critically in the arts and architecture milieu. Negative evaluation reflected new aesthetic and anti-official stance. The inertia of professional and ideological rejection of this outstanding monument of architecture stretched for many decades. During the Soviet period not for once it faced the danger of demolition. But in the public perception the Church of the Savior on Blood (everyday name of the cathedral) always remained extremely popular. The interest has especially grown in our days when the long-term restoration had finally been completed and the cathedral opened its doors. The Alfred Parland's masterpiece still remains one of the brightest and deepest symbols of its era.

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