

## THE RUSSIAN LEGACY OF HELSINKI

What is the most Western Russian city? It is not Kaliningrad, which is more German than Russian. I dare to say that it is Helsinki which is the most Russian European city. The stories of the city and the country have always been closely interwoven. The Russian legacy can still be seen in the streets of Helsinki although its distinctive Art Nouveau architecture and contemporary buildings make this metropolis a unique pearl of the Baltic Sea.

Large prospects, much space, seaport flair, “midnight sun”, and Russian speech everywhere – all that gives a feeling of a déjà vu. Coming from Belarus, I felt like home in Helsinki. The city is full of Russian tourists or emigrants. At the hostel “Europe”, at which we stayed, the majority of the travellers were from the former Soviet Union. According to some sources, there are about 50,000 Russian-speaking people in Finland, which represents about 1 % of the population (some Russians migrated to Finland before the Revolution or in the 90s). The largest percentage of the tourists visiting Finland comes from Russia (about 45 % total, or round about 2 million visitors a year). Although few Russian-speaking tourists “tamed” the Finnish language, there is no danger for them to be lost in translation. Russian menus at the restaurants and cafes, Russian guided tours, Russian souvenir shops – everything is organized for the best comfort of Russian visitors. In the country there is a Russian language newspaper, *Spektr*, founded in 1998, and a radio station, Radio Sputnik (*Ruskoje Radio Helsinki*).

Russian influence on the country and the city is remarkable. Helsinki National Library hosts the largest Slavonic Section (around 450,000 items) in a non-Slavic speaking country within Europe. During the Cold War it was the only one place where scholars were able to get acquainted with Russian scientific literature, fiction, magazines and newspapers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as modern emigrants’ and soviet literature. Russian language can be learnt at school. There are special departments at the Helsinki University, where Finnish-Russian interpreters and Russian experts are educated. There were also several institutions created that specialize in Russia and Eastern Europe such as the *Finnish Centre for Russian and Eastern European Studies* at Aleksanteri Institute. It is an independent institute of the University of Helsinki which provides high-academic expertise in Finland with regards to Russia and Eastern Europe ([www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english](http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english)). It promotes cooperation and interaction between the academic world, public administration, business life and civil society, both in Finland and Eastern Europe. Russian culture is also maintained by the Russian Centre for science and culture (<http://fin.rs.gov.ru/node/31>), the Finnish-Russian Cultural Centre, opened in April 2013 and the Finnish-Russian school, the history of which goes back to 1955.

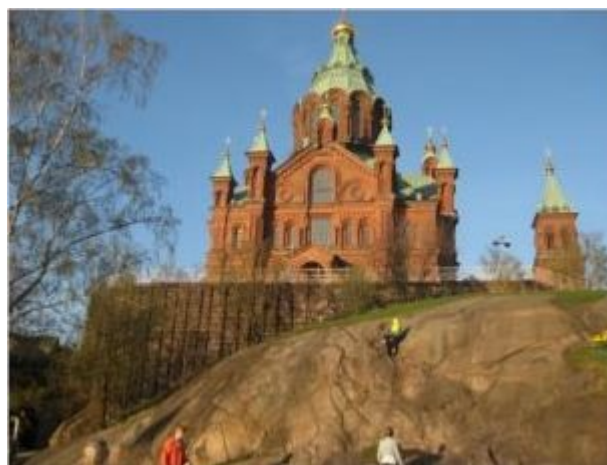
The Finnish-Russian common history doesn’t start with the annexation of Finland as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland in 1809 to the Russian Crown but can be traced back to ancient times. Finnish roots can be found in ethnic substrata of Belarusians and Russians. Many historians trace the origin of these peoples back to Finnish tribes. It is considered that the ancient homeland of all Finno-Ugric speaking peoples was situated in the region between the Volga and Kama rivers in the European part of Russia. Finn tribes were often mentioned in the Russian annals. The Finns were also mentioned as a tribe that was a part of The Rus' - a group of Varangians (Vikings). According to the Primary Chronicle of Rus' compiled in about

1113 AD, the Rus' had relocated from the Baltic region ("from over the sea"), first to north-eastern Europe, creating an early polity (Novgorod) which finally came under the leadership of Rurik. Later, Rurik's relative Oleg captured Kiev, founding Kiev Rus. The descendants of Rurik were the ruling dynasty of Rus (after 862) and the founders of the Tsardom of Russia.

The new dynasty of Russian Tsars Romanovs also had very close relations to Finland and Helsinki in particular. Tsar Alexander I of Russia moved the Finnish capital from Turku to Helsinki in 1812 to reduce Swedish influence in Finland after the victory in the Finnish war and also to move the capital closer to St. Petersburg. This consolidated the city's new role and helped setting it on the path of continuous growth. This transformation is highly apparent in the downtown core, which was rebuilt in neoclassical style to resemble St. Petersburg. Tsar Alexander I appointed a German architect, Carl Ludwig Engel, as chief of the reconstruction committee for Helsinki. The German-born architect admired St. Petersburg more than any other city, so he planned the central cathedral, the sweeping square and the classical buildings in its image.

The evidence of the Russian influence can be seen best in the architecture. Helsinki's classic Russian-style buildings include the former officers' casino on the harbour; a green-painted building that now is a restaurant. The city's baroque Natural History Museum was built as a boy's school by Russian architects and was originally named after Tsar Alexander II. More mundanely, the city's main brewery, Sinebrychoff, is an omnipresent reminder of its Russian heritage. Now part of Carlsberg, it was started by a Russian émigré, Nikolai Sinebryukhov, in the early 19th century. The locals knock back the brewery's most popular lager — Koff.

The central Senate Square with its Helsinki Cathedral is the best example of Engels' admiration of St. Petersburg and its architectural connection to its model, Saint Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg is unmistakable. The church was built from 1830-1852 as a tribute to the Grand Duke of Finland, Tsar Nicholas I of Russia. It was also known as St Nicholas' Church until the independence of Finland in 1917.



Not far from the Senate square, there is another church situated on a hill giving an impression of contemplating and at the same time watching over the city. The Uspenski Cathedral is claimed to be the largest Orthodox Church in Western Europe. On the back of the

cathedral, there is a plaque commemorating Russian Emperor Alexander II, who was the sovereign of the Grand Duchy of Finland and who ordered the cathedral's construction. From the sea both these churches create an unforgettable panorama of the greatness and peacefulness of the port capital. It is not the only Orthodox Church on the city. The yellow-painted Church of the Holy Trinity, off the Senate Square, dates back to 1827 and is the city's oldest Orthodox Church. It holds services in Old Church Slavonic, meaning that most of the Russian-speaking believers go there.

The city of Helsinki is full of monuments devoted to Russian personalities. The Russian Tsar Alexander I, who gave an autonomous status to the Grand Duchy of Finland in 1809, is depicted on a frieze on the top of the classical House of Estates, which dates back to the 1890s. It shows himself together with representatives of the aristocracy, clergy and bourgeoisie at the 1809 Porvoo Diet, which set the terms of Russian rule over Finland. The Latin inscription reads "The laws and institutions of Finland are solemnly confirmed."

A statue of another Russian Emperor Alexander II is located in the centre of the Senate Square. The statue, erected in 1894, was built to commemorate the re-establishment of the Parliament of Finland by the tsar in 1863, as well as his initiation of several reforms that increased Finland's autonomy from Russia. The statue comprises Alexander on a pedestal surrounded by figures representing the law, the culture and the peasants. During the "Russification" of Finland from 1899 onwards, the statue became a symbol of quiet resistance, with people of Helsinki protesting to the decrees of Nicholas II leaving flowers at the foot of the statue of his grandfather, then known in Finland as "the good tsar". This monument was not removed after independence unlike many other monuments that expressed the power of Russia over Finland.



Another monument can be found at the Kuappatori Square. At the quay, where during daytime life is in full swing and which at the sunset turns into a place for romantic strolls, rises a majestic Obelisk of the Empress of Russia Alexandra. The Obelisk with a golden double-headed Russian eagle was the first public monument in Helsinki. The monument was devoted to Empress Alexandra, who visited Helsinki in 1835 with her husband Nicolas I. 'The Stone of the

Empress' is placed where Alexandra and Nicholas stepped ashore from the Ischora, the steamship that brought them to Helsinki. Russian sailors removed the bronze globe and two-

headed eagle after the October Revolution in 1917. However, in 1971, they were returned. The reign of Tsar Nicolas I was highly productive and positive for Finland, even more than for Russia, where the years of his rule are estimated as more modest. He said himself that “Finland is the only one province of my great State that during the whole reign never caused me a single trouble”.

Not only imperial legacy can be traced in the city. The times of Soviet influence and the period of “*Finlandisation*” left just as deep traces. One of the symbols of the Russian-Finnish friendship is the statue of a woman at the Kaivopuisto Park. Its inscription says that it is a monument of Soviet-Finnish friendship dating from 1968.



Another sculpture created with strong soviet symbolism rises upon the city on its South Harbour. "This peace statue was erected by the Finnish People as a symbol of peaceful coexistence and friendship between Finland and the Soviet Union on April 6th, 1968", reads the inscription on a plaque on the statue in Finnish, Swedish, and Russian. This statue with a clear political message was not en vogue for the Finnish government at the time, which is why the city administration decided to put it up in a remote place. It was a smart solution, because Finland didn't reject the gift, but “hid” it from the public in a way.

Another building from 1952 at the crossing of the streets Ullankatu and Tehtaahkatu is also worth while being mentioned. Uspenski Church the heart of Russian culture, this place is its head. Here one can find the present embassy of the Russian Federation or the former embassy of the Soviet Union. The building was constructed by Finland as a part of war reparations for the USSR.

One more interesting fact is that Helsinki's neoclassical buildings were often used as a backdrop for scenes set to take place in the Soviet Union in many Cold War era Hollywood movies, when filming in the USSR was not possible. Some of the more notable ones are *The Kremlin Letter* (1970), *Reds* (1981), *Doctor Zhivago* and *Gorky Park* (1983). Because some streetscapes were reminiscent of Leningrad's and Moscow's old buildings, they, too, were used in movie productions.



Not only in the capital of Finland is Russian spirit an integral part of the culture; within a 20-minute ferry ride from Helsinki there is UNESCO World Heritage Island Suomenlinna, which also teems with the evidence of Russian presence.

Suomenlinna is a fortress that was built by the Swedish as a defence against the Russians. When Russia took control of Finland, it became a Russian military base and prison. The Russian influence is clearly seen on the walk up from the ferry port, with small pretty wooden houses that remind of dachas. The church building used to have onion domes, which have been replaced by a lighthouse tower, but it still has a bell which was cast in Moscow. The incredibly well-preserved cannons that still stand around the defence walls have inscriptions telling they were made in Perm and St. Petersburg in the 19th century. Most poignantly, on the beach, a rock bears a large inscription in curly Cyrillic handwriting. It reads: “Carved by an unhappy prisoner, Ivan Vodopyanov, 1860.”

