

# The establishment of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church: history and interpretations

Priit Rohtmets and Toomas Schvak

**Abstract** The birth of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (now officially Orthodox Church of Estonia) and political changes in 19th and 20th century Europe are inseparable from each other. As a result of the crumbling of great empires, new states emerged in north-eastern and eastern Europe along with corresponding new autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox churches. This article analyses the changes in Estonian ecclesiastical life in the context of the centralization policies in the late 19th century Russian Empire (i.e., Russification) and the dissolution of tsarist rule at the start of the 20th century. Particular attention is devoted to the activity of the Estonian Orthodox community in connection with the establishment of Estonian statehood in 1918, which in the 1920s gave rise to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. The events are placed in the context of similar processes in south-eastern Europe, with a focus laid on Estonian historiography while also examining the Russian approach to history, which continues to be rooted in the imperial tradition.

**Keywords** Orthodox Church of Estonia · Ethnophyletism · Russian Orthodox Church

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### *Context: the secular and ecclesiastical world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century has often been called the century of nationalism, a time when the national self-determination of the local peoples began playing a larger role in western, south-eastern and eastern European societies in terms of their understanding of political and religious community. However, it should not be overlooked that although national self-determination and the advent of nation-states are often seen as the antithesis of imperial identity, the relationship of the two in the 19<sup>th</sup> century context was in fact much more complicated. In broad terms, two tendencies can be seen here. For one thing, the newly proclaimed nation-states of south-eastern Europe attempted to imitate larger imperial powers in the organization of their churches. In Greece, where Theoklitos Farmakidis, one of the architects of the autocephalous Church of Greece, called national independence inconceivable in the absence of ecclesiastical independence, the church was modelled on the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) of the post-Peter I era, where the Russian state had a central role in church administration. Paradoxically, the Russian Empire, which had its own interests in Greece, did not consider the establishment of an autocephalous Greek church to be a positive step, because it meant diminished Russian influence in the region (Stamatopoulos 2014, 35–38).

The intervention into the establishment of states and churches in Greece and other regions is vivid proof that the church and Orthodox Christianity were important instruments of power for the Russian Empire's foreign policy as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Use of the church and religion in south-eastern Europe depended largely on the state of relations between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. Other powers of that era – chiefly, Britain and France – also played a role in the emergence of the new states. In the 1820s and 1830s, the Russian Empire attempted to maintain ecclesiastical unity with the Patriarchate of Constantinople when it came to Greece, and opposed an autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church there, as a counterweight to Britain and France. But half a century later, the Russian state and the ROC led the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to break away from Constantinople. This was motivated by Pan-Slavism, an attempt to increase the influence of Slavic peoples in the region and thereby amplify the Russian Empire's own influence. Relations with the Ottoman Empire were tense after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1855). With the help of the Russian ambassador in Istanbul, Count Nikolai Ignatyev, the autonomous Bulgarian Exarchate, with 13 dioceses,

was formed, and thereafter the church became autocephalous (Hopkins 2009, 125–126). The Russian state thus had an active role in supporting the independence bid by a church within the Ottoman Empire that was subordinate to the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had rejected the Bulgarian church's independence, calling it uncanonical, and for this very reason, an Orthodox synod was convened in 1872, attended by representatives of all the canonically recognized Orthodox Churches other than the ROC. At this synod, the activities of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church were declared uncanonical and the formation of an independent church on national rather than territorial grounds was denounced. This began to be called (ethno)phyletism (Kitromilides 2014, 17–20) and considered a heretical teaching. In the case of Serbia, Romania and Greece, statehood had preceded the birth of the local church and although these independence movements faced obstacles and the churches were national in style there as well, these churches were not accused of ethnophyletism, since ecclesiastical independence was backed by an Orthodox community active within the borders of the respective country (Kitromilides 2019, 33–39).

Support from the state was of key importance for the independence aspirations of all of the above churches, and thus, political and ecclesiastical independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were inseparable.

Yet it is also true, as the historian Paschalis Kitromilides notes, that the introduction of secular influences into ecclesiastical administration also increased conflicts between secular and church leaders and brought a nationalist element into the church (Kitromilides 2014, 22). In the Estonian case, however, it is important to note that the initiative for independence stemmed from the clergy. Although Estonian statehood was the catalyst for the church's independence, the role of political government in achieving ecclesiastical autonomy was practically non-existent.

While the first trend was that of the major political powers influencing the emergence of new churches and setting an example in modelling the church organisation, a second trend, opposing the first one, was that empires sought to “nationalize” the various ethnicities within empires in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the dominant, ruling dynasty's identity (Stamatopoulos 2014, 35). In other words, empires were multiethnic, but tilted toward domination of the ruling language and culture. This was also the case in Russia and it had a long-term influence on the restructuring of the church following the crumbling of the tsarist empire. In the Estonian context, the centralization policy implemented by the Russian

state in the last decades of the 19th century, also called Russification, saw schools change over to Russian as the language of instruction in the 1880s and 1890s, children in Orthodox families were given Russian-style first names, and literature was increasingly published in Russian or as parallel Estonian/Russian editions (Rohtmets 2019, 19). As the priest Anton Laar noted in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Riga and Mitava from 1887–1897, Arseny (Bryantsev) reportedly had said publicly that Estonian would no longer be needed for worship services in 40 years. Laar wrote that it was hardest for young Estonian clerics to tolerate the fact that they were not appointed to positions in Estonia, as this was construed by the authorities as a manifestation of separatism (RA, EAÕK Sinod s.d., 177–178).

In short, due to 19th century Russia's centralization policies, Orthodoxy began to be seen among Estonians and Latvians as a "Russian" religion, a perception the church could not overcome by the 1920s–1930s. That context must be considered when discussing the birth of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. In 1918, local Estonian Orthodox believers set a goal of internal and external church reform (Üleskutse Eesti apostliku kogudusele 1918, 1), and were open about the significance of the newly independent Estonian state and nation in reorganizing the church. A sentence from the first issue of the Estonian Orthodox publication *Uus Elu* in 1918 is telling: "Apostolic Christianity does not deny the sense of civic duty and love of country. Christ Himself wept for Jerusalem" (Eesti apostlik kogudus ja Eesti iseseisvus 1918, 4–5).

The striving for ecclesiastical independence manifested in an Estonian Orthodox community that had existed for decades in an environment of Russian imperialist nationalism. Nationalism as such was thus not novel but seen as a counterforce to the previous Russian nationalism. Even though people from different ethnicities were represented in the ROC in the Russian Empire, the church was a Russian nationalist church in terms of its language, culture and traditions.

At the same time, however, the ROC historiography had its own canon, an inseparable part of which is the view that the ROC is a multi-ethnic church. That perhaps explains the particularly pained reactions to criticism of ethnophyletism – Russian imperialist ultranationalism – within the ROC (Balašov, Prekup 2013, 15). The Estonians, defenders of the ROC would argue, are the ones motivated by nationalism. This conflict is seen clearly in writings published by ROC clergymen just a few years ago, where they paint the activities of the 1920s and 1930s Estonian Orthodox community and its leader Metropolitan Alexander (Paulus) as politically

motivated, nationalist and uncanonical (Eesti Õigeusu Kirik: 100 aastat autonoomiat 2021).

On the other hand, Russian government policies in the last decades of the 19th century are portrayed positively, seen as not geared not to assimilation but against dominance of the German aristocracy, the desire being to integrate Estonian areas into the Russian “state-space” (Bertash 2021, 123); the period is also described as one “where the Russian state began for the first time to consistently provide care for the peoples of the Baltic governorates” (Eugeni 2021, 26). Cited as a positive aspect is the increased Orthodox presence in the Baltics owing to Russification – besides village churches, after all, the grand St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was built in Tallinn right across from the Estonian Governorate’s seat of power, and the Pühtitsa Convent was established in eastern Estonia (Aleksius II 2009, 288–289).

Yet early 20th century sources clearly show that Estonian Orthodox believers desired ecclesiastical independence. Proponents of autonomy argued that unless religious life specific to Estonian Orthodoxy was implemented in Estonia, Orthodoxy had no hope of taking firmer root in Estonia. And so, the purpose of this article is to take a closer look at the path taken by Orthodox congregations in Estonia toward autonomy, the various way-stages, and what sorts of views were expressed for and against independence. Besides published sources and accounts of the history of the Orthodox Church in Estonia, we turn a great deal of attention to the primary sources in the archive collections of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church synod and quote at length from some of them. The aforementioned collection includes a large part of the correspondence related to the founding of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church and minutes of meetings, being the most immediate source for analysis of the events of that time.

### *The Estonian Orthodox community’s first steps toward independence*

There were a number of attempts made to spread Orthodoxy in historical Estonia. The first likely occurred in the 11th century in connection with incursions by the leaders of Kyivan Rus. There is better historical documentation on the 16th century military campaigns by the Grand Duchy of Moscow during the Livonian War, which did not however produce lasting gains. An Orthodox community among ethnic Estonians developed only

in the mid-19th century, above all in the course of large-scale conversions in 1845–1848 in southern Estonia and Saaremaa Island, for reasons that are not completely clear. It appears likely that the conversions were part of a widespread socioeconomic protest movement stemming from the dire economic conditions faced by the peasantry. Peasants might have also found that adopting the “tsar’s religion” was conducive to the aim of wresting greater independence from the Baltic German landlords and the Lutheran Church they controlled (Rimestad 2012, 57–61; Ryan 2004, 7–23).<sup>1</sup>

The Estonian Orthodox community that emerged from the 19th century conversion accounted for close to 20% of the population of Estonia. According to the 1922 census, 209,094 people stated their religion as Orthodox, 123,099 of these being ethnic Estonians and 85,995 ethnic Russians. By the time of the 1934 census, the number had risen to 212,764, 125,384 Estonians and 87,380 Russians (1922 census data 1924, 138–139; *Rahvastiku koostis ja korteriolud 1.III 1934 rahvaloenduse andmed 1935*, 118–121; Schvak 2015, 55–56). By the beginning of the 20th century, the number of ethnic Estonian public figures who were Orthodox had grown, and they formed an elite in their own right alongside prominent Lutheran Estonian public figures. The Riga Theological Seminary, which provided young Estonian men free tuition, counted Estonia’s first president Konstantin Päts, the country’s first foreign minister Jaan Poska, the diplomat and politician Ado Birk, psychology professor Konstantin Ramul and Estonia’s first chancellor of justice Anton Palvadre as alumni (Raudsepp 1998, 47–59).

Modern-day Estonia was then part of the Diocese of Riga and Mitava, which before the First World War had 267 churches, 71 prayer houses, 273,023 congregation members and 457 Orthodox schools. The Bishop of Riga and Mitava, John (Smirnov), resided in Tartu from 1915, having been evacuated from Riga due to the German invasion during the First World War (Rohtmet 2016, 268–269).

The Estonian Orthodox community took its first steps toward ecclesiastical self-determination during the war, in December 1916 when several Estonian members of Tallinn congregations wrote a memorandum to Bishop John, the Baltic Orthodox Brotherhood and the ROC’s Holy Synod calling for the formation of a diocese functioning along national lines and

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<sup>1</sup> The most thorough study of the conversions of the 1840s was by Estonian historian Hans Kruus (Kruus 1930), complemented by Latvian historian Aleksandrs Gavrilins (Гаврилин 1999). A smaller wave of conversions took place in the 1880s in northern Estonia and Hiiumaa, but it has received very little study.

the appointment of a bishop who was fluent in Estonian and, preferably, an ethnic Estonian himself (Baltimaalt 1917, 10–11; Lühike ülevaade 1921, 66). The letter met with harsh criticism in the official publications of the Riga diocese. The authors were accused of interjecting politics into the affairs of the church and planning ecclesiastical reforms resulting in structures that the local congregations could not afford to maintain. It was also insinuated that the authors wanted to “Lutheranize” Orthodoxy and sow divisions along ethnic lines (Национализация православия 1917, 122–128).

Undeterred, the leaders of the movement continued making their demands. As a result of the Russian February Revolution in 1917, the political situation across the empire transformed with the abdication of Nicholas II on 2 March. On 30 March, the Provisional Government handed down a law on the temporary self-government of Estonia, leading to a new Estonian Governorate modelled along ethnic lines with national autonomy, consisting of the existing Estonian Governorate and the northern part of the Livonian Governorate populated by Estonians. After this political sea change, 60 representatives of Estonian Orthodox congregations met in Tallinn on 6–7 April 1917, half clergy and half laity.<sup>2</sup> The demands of the December 1916 memorandum were detailed further. Among other things, it called on the plenary of the ROC to open a national diocese in Estonian areas of settlement; similar to the Estonian Governorate within the Russian Empire, it would have extensive autonomy. The diocese’s boundaries were envisioned as extending beyond the governorate’s, and there were calls for the Estonians in the Diocese of Pskov in the southeast (mainly in Petseri County) to be included. The preferred candidate for bishop would be a local inhabitant fluent in Estonian, not a monk but a representative of secular clergy (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1917a, 23–27; C.H. 1917, 2).

These demands were discussed at an extraordinary general session of the Diocese of Riga held in Tartu on 25–27 May 1917, whose work was organized almost entirely along national lines – they discussed matters jointly only the opening and closing of the plenary session, and at other times, the representatives of the Estonian, Latvian and Russian congregations of the diocese worked separately. The same pattern was true of the Lutheran church, which was planning reforms – there the Estonian

<sup>2</sup> A separate meeting of Estonian Orthodox believers was held on 4 April in Tartu; attended by 30 people. Minutes of this meeting are no longer extant. It is likely that the same positions were reached as a couple days later in Tallinn, for archpriest Aleksander Värat, who had opposed the creation of a diocese based on national/ethnic criteria, criticized the decisions of these meetings in aggregate (Värat 1917, 189–191).

and German congregations' representatives gathered in spring 1917 for separate meetings (Rohtmets, Salumäe 2011, 10). At the same time, preparations were also laid in Petrograd for reforming both the Lutheran and Orthodox Church.

In spite of the national segregation, the aforementioned extraordinary general session of the Diocese of Riga reached consensus on most of the main questions and it was agreed that indeed ecclesiastical affairs in the Baltic governorates should be organized along national lines, meaning that each nation would have a separate diocese. The meeting also approved the principle that bishops could be drawn from secular clergy, and no longer only from among the monks (Kokla 1917, 277–279). A temporary council of the Riga diocese elected at the same plenary session drafted a plan to organize congregations along national lines, asking the ROC's synod to open two vicariates within the Riga diocese based on territorial and national parameters – one for the Estonians in areas of Estonian settlement and the other for Latvians in Latvian areas (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1917b, 4). The synod accepted the proposals only partially, deciding to open only one vicariate seated in Tallinn.<sup>3</sup> The synod tasked the next plenary session of the Riga diocese to select a candidate for vicar. Based on the wishes of the local congregations, clergymen of a suitable marital status (widowed or divorced) were also eligible to stand as candidates, in addition to monks (Päevauudised 1917, 3; Uuemad teated 1917, 3).

At the plenary session of the Diocese of Riga held from 9–11 August 1917, work again took place in national sections. On 10 August, the Estonian section unilaterally elected the sole candidate nominated as vicar, the archpriest of the Estonian congregation in Petrograd, Paul Kulbusch (Piiskopkonna koosolekult 1917, 343–344)<sup>4</sup>. Kulbusch's consecration as bishop would be delayed for some time, since his divorce had not been finalized (Hindov 1929, 162).

The Vicariate of Tallinn began activity on 31 December 1917, when Kulbusch was consecrated primate of the Estonian Orthodox community in

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not possible to follow the course of the discussions held on the matter in the synod, it is likely that the synod rejected the national basis for formation of vicariates and proceeded solely from the territorial principle, approving the opening of the Vicariate of Tallinn due to the relative distance of Estonian areas of settlement from Riga. The synod may also have been influenced by the fact that opening a separate Tallinn vicariate had also been discussed in the 1880s.

<sup>4</sup> A thorough overview of the proceedings of the 1917 Diocese of Riga plenary assemblies and bishop elections, along with translations of supporting documents, has been provided by church historian Irina Pärt (Paert) (Pärt 2019).



a ceremony in St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. He became Bishop Platon (Esimese Eesti piiskopi 1918, 10–11). The event was seminal in Estonian church history as a whole, as well as from the standpoint of the Orthodox Church in Estonia – for the first time, an ethnic Estonian had been appointed an Orthodox bishop and the Orthodox congregations on Estonian soil were under a single ecclesiastical structure, becoming a springboard for seeking ecclesiastical independence as political conditions changed.

In practice, the Vicariate of Tallinn largely functioned as an autonomous structure under Platon's leadership, since due to the German occupation, Estonia had been cut off from the ROC and its central administration in Moscow since late February 1918. The episcopate in Riga was vacant, and Platon also fulfilled the latter's duties starting 23 January 1918. Platon's activities are beyond our current scope, but have been covered in previous works (e.g. Hindov 1929; Кумьш 1999; Sõtšov 2019; Rebase 2021).

It is important to emphasize that this period showed local Orthodox believers that organization of local church activities was possible even in the absence of direction and financial support from the Russian church. Moreover, Platon's term was characterized by the start of the reforms that would shape the tradition of Estonia's Orthodox Church for decades to come. They were: the partial changeover to the new calendar, simplification of the order for worship services, attempts to move the training of Orthodox clergymen to the University of Tartu. The idea of ecclesiastical independence was also supported by the declaration of Estonian independence on 24 February 1918 and the actual assumption of power after the end of the First World War and the German occupation in November 1918. At a meeting of Estonian Orthodox deans held in Tartu on 22 April 1918, two months after Estonia declared statehood, the question of total independence or autocephaly of the Estonian church was raised, as far as we know for the first time. There it was argued that although the Estonian church was not yet autocephalous, local congregations had been functioning quite independently ever since Platon was ordained (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1918, 35).

Platon did not live to see the independence of his church, as he was captured and executed by the Bolsheviks on 14 January 1919 (along with several other clergymen and town citizens) during the War of Independence (November 1918–February 1920) waged by Estonia against Bolshevik Russia after the German forces withdrew in November 1918. Platon was canonized in 2000 and his martyrdom has been the subject of a number of works (e.g. Schabert 1932; Poska 1968). His death deprived Estonian Orthodox congregations of their bishop and forced an urgent

decision on how to best advance ecclesiastical affairs. Both the War of Independence against Bolshevik Russia and the death of the bishop galvanized the conviction among Estonia's Orthodox believers that ecclesiastical autonomy was the right step when it came to the survival and development of the Estonian Orthodox community.

After Platon's death, the Riga diocesan council seated in Tartu – where the Latvia-based members had not been able to participate for a long time due to the war – became the supreme body of the entire Diocese of Riga, including the Vicariate of Tallinn. Now, the Estonian members adopted several decisions that were not actually in their remit under ROC ecclesiastical law, but which, considering the extraordinary circumstances and the experience of other Orthodox churches, were not in fact revolutionary: on 22 January 1919 they waived further control over the Latvian congregations and recommended that the Latvians form a separate diocese, on 9 February, they renamed themselves the Estonian Diocesan Council (EPN) and convened a general assembly of the Estonian Orthodox congregations scheduled for 18 March (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919a, 1; RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919b, 26). By that time, a potential replacement had been found for the position of bishop. It was Aleksander Kaelas, who had been a professor in Russia. Priest Anton Laar, who had been elected chairman of the EPN, notified the Estonian Provisional Government on 6 February 1919 that the EPN had begun taking steps toward the full separation of the Estonian diocese from the ROC, and since the war had cut off ties with the ROC's governing bodies in Moscow, they turned to the Serbian Orthodox Church to consecrate their new bishop candidate<sup>5</sup> (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919c, 13). Thus, even before the general session of the congregations scheduled for March was held, EPN had in principle decided to pursue the independence of the Estonian congregations.

### *Establishment of an independent Estonian Orthodox Church*

At the plenary session of Estonian congregations held from 18–21 March 1919 at the Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Tallinn, the main questions proved to be the canonical status of Orthodox congregations

<sup>5</sup> Philosophy professor Aleksander Kaelas (1880–1920), educated in theology but not ordained as a priest, had been considered as candidate for vicar in 1917, too, as an alternative to Paul Kulbusch. The EPN approved Kaelas, who was in Russia at the time, as candidate for bishop on 3 February 1919. (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919c, 17).

and the election of a new bishop. On 19 March, Anton Laar spoke in favour of total independence and no noteworthy objections were voiced. This can be attributed to the fact that the matter was discussed in the church administration committee, where the status quo-backing Russian congregations were not represented since they had formed their own separate committee. The only Estonian clergyman to speak out against autocephaly was archpriest Konstantin Kokla from Tartu, who argued that since Orthodox believers made up only one-seventh of Estonia's population<sup>6</sup>, the country lacked the critical mass needed for autocephaly, and there had been no cases of autocephaly being attained in a country where the Orthodox Church was not the largest denomination. This was true at the time, but as early as 1922, the Albanian Orthodox Church would declare itself to be autocephalous; the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized it in 1937 (Pano 2010, 144). In 1924, the Orthodox Church in Poland also became autocephalous. As in Albania, it was not the majority church in its respective country, and in 1931, the members made up just 11.8% of Poland's population (Wynot 2010, 121–122).

Kokla expressed the concern that a revolutionary step such as an autocephalous Estonian Orthodox Church could result in a schism along ethnic lines. Nor was Kokla in favour of the status quo. Instead he proposed a compromise, which was to seek extensive autonomy for the existing Vicariate of Tallinn while remaining within the ROC. Kokla's idea was supported only by his own Kaarepere congregation; in general, it drew strident opposition (RA, EAÕK Synod 1919d, 15–16). The main proponents of the autocephalous church, Anton Laar and the deacon Joann Juhtund, stressed that significant changes had to be made for the overwhelming majority of Estonian Orthodox believers to truly embrace the faith – first, reforms of worship services and church organization similar to the ones implemented in the Lutheran Church, something that was not possible without total right of self-determination; secondly, the ties with Russia were deleterious to the reputation of the church, since the Lutheran majority in Estonia associated Orthodox religion with Russian expansionism and Russian policies, Russia having turned hostile toward the independent Republic of Estonia. These arguments were also supported by clergymen such as Nikolai Päts and Karp Ustav, who took a more moderate position compared to Laar and Juhtund (RA, EAÕK Synod 1919d, 3–4).

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<sup>6</sup> In reality, the share of the Orthodox believers in the total population was somewhat higher, approaching one-fifth according to the census data.

At the joint session of the plenary held on 21 March, the Russian congregations' representatives, as expected, also supported autonomy and not autocephaly, but in the voting, it was the proposal of the church administration committee to declare the Estonian Orthodox Church autocephalous and seek recognition for autocephaly from other Orthodox churches which passed. The boundaries of the Republic of Estonia were considered to also be the boundaries of the church; however, in the spirit of the positions of 1916 and 1917, there was still a desire to find ways of uniting Estonian congregations outside Estonia under the jurisdiction of an Estonian bishop (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919d, 51–53). Also on 21 March, new bishops were chosen – Aleksander Kaelas, who was still in Russia, was named archbishop and archpriest Aleksander Paulus of Pärnu was appointed vicar. A new six-member diocesan council was also elected; they were to carry out the church's executive function (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919d, 24).

As we have seen, the Estonian Orthodox Church had now unilaterally declared independence, yet it was still unrecognized by other Orthodox churches. There was also a need to find bishops who would be willing to consecrate the Estonian Orthodox Church's primate.

The church continued to run its affairs autonomously, and the government of the Republic of Estonia also recognized its status. Yet practical considerations were also important, and thus the Estonian Orthodox Church adopted statutes on parish and diocesan administration in 1917 by the All-Russian Church Council in Moscow. The provisions were consistent with the democratic ideals held in high regard in Estonia in both public administration and ecclesiastical governance. The statutes had, with the consent of Bishop Platon, been translated into Estonian back in 1918, being printed in Tartu (Õigeusu kirikuseadused 1918).

Still, we should add that the Estonian government updated the rules governing congregations in April 1919, affirming that it did not recognize the All-Russian Church Council's regulations or the clauses in the 1918 publication which stated that the ROC was the supreme authority with respect to the Estonian church (Greeka-katoliku 1919). Thus, in spring 1919, Estonia decoupled the congregations from ROC's administrative control. All real estate and monetary transactions such as sale of land, taking of loans and pledging of assets had to have the approval of the Estonian Provisional Government (Rohtmets 2018, 20).

Besides administrative independence, canonical independence was an issue. Pursuant to a decision taken February 1919, the Serbian Orthodox Church was contacted through the Estonian Foreign Ministry in April of that year. The Serbians replied that they would consider consecrating the

Estonian bishop only with the consent of the Patriarch of Moscow (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920a, 59). Another attempt was made to contact the Serbian Orthodox Church in late summer via Finland, but it can be concluded indirectly that no positive answer came (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919e, 48–49).

In August 1919, the EPN took the unexpected step of turning to the Archbishop of Canterbury, primate of the Church of England, Randall Davidson, in order to have the bishops ordained. It is not completely clear why a bishop from a different religious communion was contacted, but some conjectures can be made. From the ecclesiastical point of view, closer ecumenical contacts seen at the turn of the 19th and 20th century between the Orthodox and Anglican Church may have played a role – both the ROC and, based on unconfirmed reports, the then future bishop Platon had taken part (Sõtšov 2009, 58–62). Also, because of the military and political support it had provided during the War of Independence, the United Kingdom was perceived as a friendly and benevolent country and the attitudes of the Estonian political leaderships may have indirectly affected the EPN as well. The third and most important reason was, bluntly put, desperation, since it was difficult to get consent from the Patriarch of Moscow in a wartime situation and, in light of the independence of the church, this was not considered as a first option; however, without said support it was hard for a canonically unrecognized Orthodox church to enlist bishops from other Orthodox churches to ordain the Estonian bishops.

Due to its past legacy, the outlook for the Orthodox Church was not cloudless in Estonia. The Lutheran Church was still the majority church and the Orthodox Church had to parry accusations of being pro-Russian. Secondly, for their part, Catholics, who desired to activate mission work in Estonia, wondered whether the Orthodox believers might convert to Catholicism<sup>7</sup>. Thirdly, the Estonian parliament had in 1919 rescinded privileges for the Lutheran and Orthodox church and the church lost its existing land and schools.

Davidson himself found the appeal from the Estonian Orthodox Church curious. In his letter of October 1919, he inquired as to whether the bishop ordained by Anglican bishops would be Anglican or Orthodox in

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<sup>7</sup> The attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to convert local Orthodox believers allegedly originated during the German occupation of 1918 (see e.g. Rooma-katoliku 1918, 3). In the 1920s, some former Orthodox clergymen, such as deacon Joann Juhtund, who was no longer with the church by then, also are said to have worked for this cause (Комаров, Токарева 2014, 81).

creed. If Orthodox, would it be independent in future or continue in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate; and which of the other Orthodox churches, if any, would be willing to recognize him (RA, Välisministeerium 1919, 8). It appears that the problem of the subsequent confessional affiliation of the bishop forced the Estonian Orthodox Church to abandon its activity on this front, or at least that is how Metropolitan Alexander and head priest Anton Laar later stated (RA, Riigikantselei 1923, 8; Laar 1923, 9). At the same time, we know that one more letter was sent to Davidson on 27 November 1919, in which, in response to his queries, the Estonians expressed their readiness to recognize the Church of England as the mother church of the Estonian Orthodox Church and abandon autocephaly for being in the Anglican jurisdiction (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919f, 126–127). Whether this letter reached Davidson via Ants Piip and what the reply was, if any, is unfortunately unknown.

In parallel, negotiations were held between the Estonian and Finnish Orthodox churches starting in June 1919 to determine possibilities for uniting the two neighbours' and linguistic cousins' Orthodox churches to lay a better footing for gaining recognition for autocephaly. As with many other developments on the ecclesiastical front, a broader idea in the public sphere was a catalyst – the notion of an Estonia-Finland political union first proposed in 1918 and covered in the press in early 1919 (Zetterberg 1977, 192). In Finland, where the canonicity of local congregations was more clear-cut (Finnish-populated areas had been united into a separate Diocese of Vyborg already back in 1892) and the number of Orthodox believers was smaller than in Estonia (35 congregations with about 63,000 members), views of the prospect of autocephaly were more pessimistic. Although autocephaly was a distant goal for the Finns as well, they did not think it was possible to go directly from the status of diocese to autocephaly without passing through the autonomous stage. Due to the low number of Orthodox faithful, it was argued, Finnish autocephaly would not meet the condition of three dioceses. Thus, extensive autonomy within the ROC was set as the goal from the beginning in Finland. It was believed that autocephaly would be possible only in the case of union with Eastern Karelian and Estonian congregations (Suomen 1919, 112–114; Kysymys 1919, 153–154).

Although the contacts between the Estonian Orthodox community and the Finns did not lead to the desired goal, they did lay the foundation for close cooperation between the two Orthodox churches, which would be beneficial in negotiations held with the Patriarchate of Constantinople

several years later, in 1922–1923. It also opened up a communication channel for asking Bishop Seraphim (Lukyanov) of Vyborg to ordain the Estonian bishop. However, Seraphim was hostile to the idea of the Estonian and Finnish churches pursuing independence, and repeatedly refused the request unless he had the consent of the Patriarch of Moscow (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919g, 160; SOKHA, Kirkollishallitus 1922).

### *Negotiations between the Estonian Orthodox community and representatives of the ROC. The ordination of Bishop Alexander*

Since the question of ordaining the bishop was a more urgent matter than the recognition of autocephaly, in the end it was necessary to reach out to the Patriarch of Moscow. This was done in October 1919 via telegram sent to Moscow, which made no mention of full independence but emphasized the desire to create an autonomous diocese coinciding with Estonia's borders and requesting that archpriest Aleksander Paulus be ordained as its archbishop. At this point, there was still no contact with Aleksander Kaelas, who was in Russia in an area controlled by White forces; and he was probably not aware that he had been named as a candidate for bishop. When that information did reach him, he wrote in a letter mailed 2 April 1920 that he did not wish to become bishop, because he was not a priest and wished to continue his academic activities (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920b, 159–160).

The responses from Moscow indicate that first the Supreme Church Council of the ROC decided on 20 October 1919 to ordain archpriest Paulus as the Vicar of Tallinn in the Riga diocese, but at a joint session of the synod and supreme church council on 19 November, the decision was revised – it was decided to form a separate Estonian diocese coinciding with the Republic of Estonia and to ordain Aleksander Paulus as its bishop (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1919h, 117).

Comparing the ROC's decision with the decisions of the Estonian Orthodox congregations' general assembly of spring 1919, we see that the decision from Moscow did not satisfy the majority of Estonian Orthodox faithful since no autonomy was offered or promised. But at least Estonia was a separate canonical unit and the lack of a bishop – which had crippled the church's activity – was nearing a solution. The ordination was delayed, however, since the ordaining bishops were unable to travel from Russia, there was no other bishop to join the Bishop of Vyborg, Seraphim, who would have agreed to travel for the ordination as long as

he received a written order from the patriarch in Moscow. At the same time, by the beginning of 1920 the Estonian negotiators with Moscow increasingly emphasized their desire for independence. The letter sent to the Patriarch of Moscow on 16 February 1920 was key, asking him to expedite the ordination of Aleksander Paulus as bishop of an autocephalous Estonian Orthodox Church – in the Estonian archives, it is the first communication sent to Moscow in which the word “autocephaly” is used (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920c, 94).

Gathering on 10 May 1920, the hierarchs of the ROC finally discussed the status of the Estonian church and despite rumours that they had granted full autonomy to the Estonian church at this meeting, it became evident during a visit of EPN member Paul Sepp to Moscow that the decision mentioned only granting extensive self-government to the Estonian diocese of the ROC formed in November 1919. The text of the decision was not even sent to the EPN but rather to a former archbishop of Pskov living in Estonia as a war refugee, Yevsevi (Groz dov), also known as Eusebius, whom the administration of the ROC intended to appoint in charge of the Diocese of Riga (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920d, 66–68). This was indicative of the ROC leaders’ supercilious attitude toward the Estonian Orthodox Church and the EPN. The ROC did not consider the EPN to be a canonically legitimate institution and therefore felt that all communication pertaining to Estonia should go through the official bodies of the Diocese of Riga.

A report written by Sepp is extant from his trip to Moscow, reflecting the Russian clerics’ intention to oppose the appointment of an Estonian bishop: Sepp had managed to visit Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow, who was under house arrest, to confer with him privately regarding Estonian ecclesiastical matters. Sepp writes:

I presented to the Patriarch documents from which the Holy Father could see how some higher clergymen were working against the autocephaly of the Estonian church and ordination of its bishop, and in this regard planned to misinform the higher clerical circles in Russia on whom the ordination and decision-making depend. Machinations were also under way regarding our Orthodox Finnish cousins. After this, in the presence of Metropolitan Sergius<sup>8</sup>, I briefed the patriarch on the state of our Estonian apostolic faith, lack of priests, the withdrawal of bishop candidates, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Sergius (Stragorodsky), Metropolitan of Vladimir and Shuya.



outlook for the near future, which is not rosy, since lack of clarity about canonical independence and the calendar issue may usher in major repercussions and even changes of religion.

After meeting the patriarch, Sepp again met Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky) and many other bishops to convey the wishes of Estonian Orthodox faithful. At these meetings, it turned out that Estonia was viewed by the Patriarchate as just a diocese. Sepp writes:

There I discovered that the Estonian Apostolic Church is termed an ‘eparchy’ and the decision in our matter has been ordered to be sent to ‘Archbishop Eusebius<sup>9</sup> .... to the Riga eparchy’”. The question now split into two questions, as it became evident that the Estonian church was considered a certain part of the Riga eparchy since Archbishop Eusebius was recognized as its primate. One of the archbishops tried to explain that eparchy meant the same thing as autonomy.

Sepp was particularly critical of Archbishop Yevsevi, but described the general sentiment among the Estonian Orthodox community:

I emphasized that here was only pure Orthodox striving and a true spirit of the Estonian who has always scorned foreign influences being foisted on them through religion, and that is why no subject of the Republic of Estonia would accept the idea that our apostolic Orthodox Church could be led by someone who fled the war and longs to return to Russia and Belarus, who has abandoned his flock and has not been chosen by the Estonian people, someone who does not know our souls and situation at all.

One of the eldest members of the synod explained that officially and legally they, synod members, did not consider there to be an Estonian church, lacking the bishop; there is only the Riga eparchy, with Archbishop Eusebius appointed its temporary head.

I replied that the congregation is not created by the bishop but the people; the bishop is consecrated for a certain flock of faithful, 200 thousand members strong; that it is strange to maintain an official of an institution that does not exist such as the Riga

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<sup>9</sup> Former Archbishop of Pskov, Yevsevi or Eusebius (Grozdov), who was in Estonia as a refugee.

eparchy and which due to the force of circumstance will not be resurrected again in that form, because both Estonia and Latvia have statehood. Even in the former tsarist times, both demanded separation in religious affairs. To maintain a person on Estonian soil as an agent, who cannot move around, whereas at the same time we have enough diligent and educated clergymen of pure Russian stock – is something that I as a delegate find unacceptable and I demand that the synod take a different position regarding Eusebius's activities and administrative functions and allow itself to be informed about Estonia by a more appropriate source. Metropolitan Sergius replied to me that the lines pertaining to Eusebius are only in the minutes and were not sent to us.

Seeing that Eusebius is maintained in Estonia as a Russian agent and furthermore, that they want him to continue to inform them – I said: 'I fear that I will leave here with even less confidence than when I crossed the threshold of the synod that the justified demands of our Estonian church will be heard. Don't forget, fathers, that the forefathers of the Estonians are of the Roman Catholic faith and our fathers and relatives are Lutheran and we have active relations with religious England. There are signs that the eyes of the advocates of these religions are open to us. Having chaired part of the congress myself, I am certain that at the next congress the people will take a different orientation if their most holy strivings for religious independence are not satisfied' (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920d).

Paul Sepp's advocacy for the Estonian Orthodox community's decisions led to the ROC issuing a new decision on 28 June 1920 bearing Sergius's signature. It declared the "Estonian Orthodox Church, pursuant to its wishes, autonomous until a decision is made regarding autocephaly at the All-Russian Council".<sup>10</sup>

Before the new decision, Patriarch Tikhon had on 17 June sent the EPN a letter explaining why granting autocephaly to the Estonian church was currently impossible. He mentioned three reasons: (1) administrative – a church council of the ROC would have to be convened to decide

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<sup>10</sup> No official copy of the decision is extant in Estonian archives, but its text has been reproduced in the letter by Sergius, Metropolitan of Vladimir, to Paul Sepp, which has been published in translation in an appendix to the book by Alexy II (Aleksius 2009, 533–534).

the matter, and this was planned only in 1921; (2) historical – Estonia lacked sufficient Orthodox experience and ecclesiastical hierarchy, since Orthodoxy only started spreading extensively in the 19th century and until recently there was even no separate diocese there; (3) statistical – the Orthodox faithful made up a minority in Lutheran Estonia. Thus, autonomy was supposed to be valid only for one diocese located in Estonia. However, Tikhon did propose that the one Estonian-based diocese could be divided into two if the Estonians wished, which would rule out a situation of Estonia having only one bishop. The bishop or bishops would be dependent on the Patriarchate of Moscow solely in matters of canonical law and teachings. Tikhon argued that in other regards, the bishop would act independently, since Estonia was sovereign; such a system would ensure balance between the church canons and requirements arising from political independence (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920e, 75–76).

Although the decision and its rationale did not completely satisfy the Estonian Orthodox, it meant a certain solution to the impasse. On 2–4 September 1920, the first church council of the Estonian Orthodox Church took place under conditions of autonomy, with new bishop elections held. On 3 September, archpriest Aleksander Paulus was unanimously elected, and on 4 September the hegumen of Petseri Monastery, John (Bulin), was chosen as his vicar, who would have tended to the Russian congregations (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920f, 12, 29). John was chosen regardless of the fact that Tikhon had previously commented on John's young age, which should disqualify him from being ordained as a bishop. Indeed, John was not ordained as bishop after the plenary.<sup>11</sup> The ordination of Aleksander Paulus also was delayed by several months until finally, on 5 December 1920, the Archbishop of Vyborg and Finland, Seraphim, and the former Archbishop of Pskov, Yevsevi, consecrated him as bishop in St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, bringing to an end the period of close to two years when Estonia had no locally-based Orthodox bishop (Isa Aleksandri 1920, 7–10). The changes in church government resulted in EPN being renamed a synod at the church council of 1920 (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920f, 6–7). It continued to serve as an administrative body made up of both clergy and laity and was not a bishops' synod.

<sup>11</sup> John or Ioann (Bulin) was born in 1893, and thus was only 27. The ROC did not customarily ordain men under the age of 30 as bishops. He became bishop on 25 April 1926, when he was consecrated as Bishop of Petseri (Pechory).

### *The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople grants autonomy*

Although Estonia now had a bishop and the canonical status of the church was confirmed, the situation was far from what the decisions of the 1919 plenary had sought to achieve.

In the early 1920s, the Orthodox Church continued to gradually build their organization. With the relationship between church and state defined, this period also witnessed a battle over land and school buildings that the Estonian authorities sought to nationalize. The Estonian government considered both the Lutheran and Orthodox Church class-based organizations dating from the days of the Russian Empire, and under the new democratic rule of law, Estonia enjoyed general freedom of religion and religious organizations had internal freedom of action and equal treatment, so past privileges were rescinded. That included land ownership, the right to charge members compulsory membership dues, and the provision of school education (Rohtmets 2018, 25–33).

The church council also discussed matters related to remuneration of clergy. At the council starting 29 March 1921, it was decided that although the question of pay for clergy was not resolved in all aspects, worship services had to be held every Sunday. If difficulties arose for a congregation, the synod had to be informed so a solution could be found together. Conveying false information or failure to provide information could lead to dismissal from the position of priest. The council also emphasized the need to stimulate religious life, introducing congregational singing in churches (which was practised in very few congregations in the early 1920s), organizing prayer hours and clergymen's oratory evenings (these activities were especially important in areas remote from the church), carrying out children's worship services and founding youth organizations and women's organizations.

The synod was tasked with developing a new hymnal, updating sermon content and producing a statute for youth organizations and a programme for prayer and children's worship services. The ROC's rules on bestowing Christian names were also relaxed. To this point, only names in a list issued by the ROC could be bestowed at christenings, and thus Estonian children had been given Russian names. The plenary decided to give parents complete freedom to choose names of children. It was also customary to give children German names and the plenary decided to emphasize that the use of Estonian national names was to be preferred. The Society for the Estonian Language had tabled its own proposals on this subject to the church and in 1914, folklorist and diplomat Oskar

Kallas had published a paper entitled “Sadakakskümmend uut ristinime“ (120 New Christian Names; Kallas 1914), its use as a guide was also urged (RA, EAÕK sinod 1921a).

In 1920, the local council of the Estonian Orthodox Church decided that Russian congregations could unite along ethnic lines and under their autonomous administrative structure (Eesti apostliku-usu 1920, 2). This was a concession to the congregations having formed, at their own initiative back in March 1919, a deanery for Russian congregations across Estonia and electing archpriest Aleksei Aristov as dean. Although these steps went against the decisions of the plenary, the EPN decided in July 1919 to temporarily accept Aristov and his structure (RA, Politseitalitus 1919, 14). Aristov’s insubordination, searches for support from the Regional Government of Northwest Russia and the disputes over church property led first to a shakeup in the deanery in May 1920 followed by a search for a new organizational solution (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1920h, 402).

At the church council of 1920, the position of vicar of the Russian congregations was established and a clerical council was formed to assist him, but since the hegumen John (Bulin) could not be affirmed as vicar due to his young age and there were no other candidates at that point, the Russian congregations’ clerical council began work independently<sup>12</sup> (Saard 2008, 1568). Relations between the clerical council and the rest of the church were relatively friendly and constructive until autumn 1921, at which point tensions increased over the synod’s plans to make the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral the bishop’s cathedral and place it under Archbishop Alexander’s personal direction<sup>13</sup>. The conflict was also deepened by the desire of many Russian congregations to continue to use the old Julian calendar (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1921b, 62, 65–66).

Starting from that time, the clerical council began direct insubordination to the synod and the archbishop, until it was disbanded by a new church council decision in June 1922. The clerical council defied the decision, and continued activity on the pretext that Russian congregations needed protection, and tried to seek recognition from the state as a separate legal person (RA, Siseministerium 1922a, 166–168; see also Saard 2008, 1568–1569). The security police and Ministry of the Interior then

<sup>12</sup> Archbishop Alexander continued to be the council’s titular chairman in the absence of the Russian congregations’ vicar. Alexander never actually participated in its work, though.

<sup>13</sup> Similar processes also took place in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, where an attempt was made to take over Tallinn Cathedral from a German congregation for the benefit of the bishop (Ketola 2000, 73–86, 145–152, 175–182)

intervened, with Interior Minister Karl Einbund maintaining that from the very start the formation of such a body was against the Estonian laws on religion and illegitimate in the eyes of the state (RA, Siseministeerium 1922b, 179). It appears that the unlawful activities of the clerical council ceased after the national government became involved in September 1922; at least there are no further extant documents indicating that it continued activity<sup>14</sup>.

At the same time, the church council tried to decrease the participation of non-citizens in church administration, demanding that people who did not have Estonian citizenship should not be allowed to take part in the church councils. The implementation of this proposal was postponed in the early 1920s. At the church council of 1924, it was stated that this would be the last time non-citizens would be allowed to take part (Saard 2008, 1572–1573). In 1922, the synod noted that clergymen with Russian citizenship could administer family-related religious rites but could not issue certificates on marital status. Clergymen with Estonian citizenship from their neighbouring congregations had to do so (RA, Siseministeerium 1922c, 157).

That same year, the Estonian Orthodox community again began exploring possibilities to break away from the ROC. The Soviet regime had launched a massive crackdown against religion in Soviet Russia, arresting Archbishop Tikhon. This deepened the schism within the ROC. The Soviets backed radical reform movements, one of the biggest and best known being the Living Church Movement, also called the Renovationists. On 18 June, the acting patriarch, Agafangel (Preobrazhensky), the Metropolitan of Yaroslavl, granted the ROC dioceses permission to become self-governing instead of submitting to the new Supreme Church Administration formed by the Renovationist movement in Moscow (Шкаровский 2018, 62–63). Agafangel's move was based on a decree issued by Tikhon on 20 November 1920 that had likewise allowed bishops to declare temporary autocephaly if ties with Moscow were severed (Попов 2005, 210–212). The Russian bishops in exile exploited the situation to legitimate themselves; to this point, Tikhon had declined to recognize the church administration they had established. On 13 September 1922, they formed the Synod of Russian Bishops in Serbia; the synod aspired to authority over all ROC

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<sup>14</sup> However, individuals associated with the council did in future as well take part in advocating for Russian interests and the battle for the cathedral's existing status (see e.g. Rimstad 2012, 101–102), just not in the capacity as members of the clerical council.

congregations outside of Soviet Russia (including in Finland and the Baltics) and later evolved into the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) (Поспеловский 1995, 124–125).

The Estonian church now faced a situation where its mother church was split into three camps and there was no legitimate church administration in Moscow. Reports on the situation of the church reached Estonia, but instability prevented official direct contacts between the Estonian Orthodox Church and the ROC. We should remember at this point that canonical self-government or autonomy had been granted to Estonia only at the level of one diocese and the ordination of a second bishop had not succeeded. Thus, if something had befallen Archbishop Alexander, it would have essentially marked a return to the same situation as in 1919–1920. The 1919 plenary had clearly called for liturgical reforms, which the diocesan self-government granted by Moscow in 1920 did not allow, nor did it serve the purpose of decoupling the Estonian church from Russia. Moreover, there was no hope of the situation changing. The All-Russian Church Council that was supposed to be held in 1921 was prohibited by the Soviet regime and thus, the matter of broader independence for the Estonian church was placed on hold indefinitely. Moreover, considering the patriarch's reasoning in his letter of 1920 for denying autocephaly – the scant history of the Orthodox religion in Estonia, the low proportion of Orthodox believers, the lack of experienced clergy, etc. – it was very unlikely that the All-Russian Church Council would have decided differently.

At the second church council of the Estonian Orthodox Church held on 14–16 June 1922, it was decided to call on Archbishop Alexander and the synod to take all steps possible to obtain recognition for the church's canonical independence. This provision was also incorporated into the draft of the new church ordinance and unanimously approved at the plenary, i.e. Russian congregations' representatives also gave their support (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1922). The printed version of the statute reads: “The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, being part of the global apostolic Orthodox community, is an independent, self-governing establishment with the rights of a legal person and has a fraternal relationship with all the other Apostolic Orthodox churches. Note: For the recognition of the canonical independence of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church by other independent churches, the Council proposes to the Archbishop along with the Synod: to promptly make all possible and necessary arrangements to this end” (Eesti ap.-õigeusu kirikuseadus 1922). This provision was expressed in general enough wording that it could be

perceived as seeking recognition of autonomous status, but it could also be seen as continuing to seek autocephalous status from the Moscow Patriarchate. The ambiguity meant that Russian congregations' members had no reason to protest against it.

Proceeding from the decision of the church council, the synod made the decision on 17–18 August to turn to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1923, 7). It was probably because of the fact that the Finnish church had established a relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarchate back in 1919 and received confirmation the next year that if local Orthodox churches could not independently manage with their own governance, the Ecumenical Patriarch had the right to intervene in their affairs in extraordinary cases (SOKHA, Kirkollishallitus 1923). While this possibility was not utilized in 1920 due to the restoration of relations with the Moscow Patriarchate, by 1922 amidst the extraordinary situation, the churches knew for certain that the Patriarchate of Constantinople was prepared to address the matter of canonical status.

The Finns had the initiative in the dealings with Constantinople. The Finnish government also had an interest in autocephalous status for its church, and took over part of the communications and, eventually, the expenses of sending a Finnish delegation to Turkey. In Estonia, however, official circles showed almost no interest in the church issues in the early 1920s. Furthermore, the Finns were now the ones who urgently needed to ordain their new bishop, and since relations between the pro-Russian Archbishop of Finland and Vyborg, Seraphim, had soured, an Estonian named Herman Aav was proposed to be ordained alongside him as a vicar. Seraphim worked actively to oppose this and without permission from the Moscow patriarch, no ROC bishop would have undertaken his ordination. The letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch was sent in January 1923 and in March, Patriarch Meletios IV responded to the Finns, offering not autocephaly but extensive autonomy within his jurisdiction; the only obligations to the Ecumenical Patriarch would have been to mention the patriarch in intercessory prayer, seeking approval and blessing for the head of the local church from Constantinople, and use of myrrh consecrated by the Patriarch of Constantinople. The patriarch said the autonomy he was offering was intended as a temporary solution and as the situation in Russia normalized, the Finnish church might once again revert to ROC jurisdiction. It would be up to the Finnish Orthodox Church to decide how they organized relations with the ROC (Setälä 1966, 132).



The Estonians wrote their request to Meletios on 17 April 1923 (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1923, 6–7), no doubt aware by then of the response received by the Finns; still, the Estonians sought autocephaly. The patriarch's response did not deter either church – they hoped that they could convince the patriarch in person in Constantinople of the necessity of autocephaly.

Archbishop Alexander predicated his request for autocephaly on the history of the church and prevailing political winds, referring to the decisions of the 1919 plenary he said were attended by representatives from 80% of the congregations: He cited the decision of the 1919 plenary as follows: “The most important vital demand of the Estonian Orthodox Church is that it now, within the borders of the independent state and nearly totally cut off from its existing mother church in Russia by war and political circumstances, become autocephalous so that the church could continue to thrive and develop in accordance with the conditions of the life of its people on the basis of dogmas and canons.”

Alexander made reference to the autonomy granted by the ROC in 1920 and his ordination as the first step, which was to be followed by autocephaly:

In the interim, since 1920 where the Estonian Church along with the elected clergy and laity is led by Archbishop Alexander, the Estonian Apostolic-Orthodox Church has de facto autocephalous church status. As a church in an independent country, the Estonian church has independently been in charge of its civic matters – governance, economy, education... /---/ The government of the Republic of Estonia has recognized the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church as an independent church. To reinforce the church's independence and to carry out joint endeavour such as the professional education of clergy, the Estonian church intends to join with the kindred people's Finnish Apostolic Orthodox Church, who has also turned to the Eastern Patriarchate on the same conditions to recognize autocephaly. In the field of the faith and canons, the Estonian church has also most resolutely adhered to Apostolic Orthodox purity and vows to also remain in contact with the Eastern Rite Apostolic Orthodox Church in future.

The decision to write to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople stemmed from the internal state of both the ROC and the EOC. The request for autocephaly was made with due respect given to the canonical order of the church:

But a serious and unforeseeable event occurred that forces the Estonian church to take urgent steps of the recognition of autocephaly. Namely, the Estonian church's ties to the mother church in Russia were severed completely. Not just that, but the existing formal union with the Russian church threatens to pose serious difficulties for the Estonian church, when it comes to maintaining purity of the Apostolic Orthodox faith and serious hierarchical succession. Already in late 1921, as Patriarch Tikhon complained to the Eastern Patriarchs, ecclesiastical irregularities occurred in Ukraine, which manifested in the introduction of a false hierarchy. Now the church government led by Tikhon has been removed, a new church government has been established in its place: a new church assembly to be convened, supposedly to dismiss the currently imprisoned Patriarch Tikhon. The new movement calls itself the "living church". The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, holding true to canonical underpinnings, cannot recognize the new Russian movement, which it seems has come to power due to political influences in Russia, as its mother church, not even formally, as the legitimate mother church does not even exist anymore: now there are only a few legitimate bishops in their posts and it is unknown how long they will remain there.

Without formal autocephaly, it was hard for the Estonian church to continue, since Alexander wrote, "it is not possible for the Estonian Orthodox church to make arrangements for ordaining its suffragan bishops, although there are legitimate candidates: 1 widowed archpriest and 1 archimandrite." Another problem was the Russian congregations, who were visibly influenced, according to Alexander, by the Living Church Movement: "For an autocephalous Estonian church, these attempts from the errant former mother church would no longer be feared."

Alongside the request for autocephaly, Alexander asked Meletios to give him and Bishop Yevsevi blessing to ordain for the Estonian church vicar bishops who meet the canonical requirements in order to shore up the church's activity (RA, EAÕK Sinod 1923a).

It was some time before delegations could be sent to the Patriarch. Above all, the delay was due to the Estonian side. Since the candidate of Finnish vicar Herman Aav was Estonian, the original plan was to send him as part of the Estonian delegation, but the Estonian side had trouble defraying the travel expenses, so the Finns had to include him in their own delegation (Setälä 1966, 142).

In the end, only Archbishop Alexander travelled from Estonia to see the Patriarch of Constantinople. The joint delegation of the two churches spent 2–10 July 1923 in Turkey. It consisted of Finnish vicar candidate Herman Aav; dean (representing Finnish church administration) Sergei Solntsev; a Finnish government representative, Eemil Nestor Setälä; and Alexander. On the first day of the talks, 3 July, the patriarch announced that it was not considered possible to grant autocephaly to either church, since neither church had the requisite three bishops, both were minority churches in their respective homelands and the patriarchate's synod had agreed that no new autocephalous churches would be founded before the ecumenical council of 1925. It was also warned that since the patriarch had to leave the city on 10 July at the latest to comply with orders from the Turkish authorities, continued demands for autocephaly could cause the negotiations to fall through entirely (Setälä 1966, 147–149).

On 5 July, Setälä and Alexander announced that they had accepted the conditions outlined by Meletios IV. The Finnish church's autonomy act was signed on 6 July, the Estonian one on 7 July. Herman Aav was ordained bishop on 8 July (Setälä 1966, 152). The Estonian and Finnish churches had still not achieved autocephaly, but had received significantly expanded autonomy, which allowed especially Estonia to portray it as complete independence.

Having returned to Estonia, Metropolitan Alexander briefed Estonian authorities on the status of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, writing the following: "As the Church of Constantinople is the mother church of all Eastern Rite churches according to our canons, the Patriarch bears the honorary name of the ecumenical patriarch and furthermore, no Russian orientation was sensed in Constantinople currently, the Estonian church's endeavour was a complete success and starting 7 July of this year, there is an independent Estonian Metropolis as an addition to the family of other Eastern Rite churches" (RA, Riigikantselei 1923, 8).

According to the *tomos* – the patriarch's decree – the Metropolis would have three dioceses – Tallinn, Petseri and Saaremaa. Alexander was given the title of Metropolitan of Tallinn and All Estonia. All bishops could be ordained locally, notifying the Patriarch of Constantinople thereof. Thus, the obligation of notification and the mention of the Patriarch in intercessory prayer were the only differences between autonomy and autocephaly. It is no wonder that in Estonia, autonomy was often interpreted as full autocephaly, which it was not in terms of ecclesiastical law.

Just as important for the Estonian Orthodox believers was the decoupling from Russia, which allowed bigger steps to be taken toward

repairing the reputation of the church and carrying out reforms in both countries. It could thus be said that the Estonian and Finnish churches had achieved the best possible solution for the circumstances, which simultaneously satisfied most of their needs and did not sever their communion with other Orthodox churches, which unilaterally declaring autocephaly would have meant.

The church continued to pray for Patriarch of Moscow Tikhon, and after his death in 1925, the synod proposed to all clerics that a prayer for the repose of the soul of Tikhon be read 40 days after his passing.

### *Summary*

The founding of the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church took place during a time marked by the rise of national consciousness in the late 19th century and the decline of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires in the early 20th century. Just as Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Serbian churches became independent in south-eastern Europe during the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire, similar processes took place during and after the First World War, when south-eastern Europe saw the birth of the Albanian church, while Orthodox churches in newly proclaimed nation-states in the former Russian Empire sought independence. An autocephalous Polish church and autonomous Estonian, Finnish and Latvian Orthodox churches were a result of this process. As in the Balkans, the principle in the north-east of Europe was that an independent country should have an autocephalous church. The ROC has accused the newcomers of being nationalist churches, although this disregards the fact that the tsarist-era church was itself nationalist by nature, and the policy of Russification was the main factor that drove Estonian Orthodox believers to develop and institute their own local religious customs and traditions, just as local unique customs and traditions have become rooted in the ROC and other churches.

In this light, representatives of Estonian congregations decided in March 1919 that the Estonian Orthodox Church had to seek independence so that it could develop in an independent country amidst Estonian Orthodox believers. Like the Lutheran church, which accounted for about 78% of the population in the 1920s and 1930s, Estonia's Orthodox Church, comprising 19% of the population, declared itself to be a people's church, demonstrating that Estonia had a second major religious organization representing one-fifth of the population.

This article describes the steps taken by the Orthodox community to achieve canonical independence and cites sources to show the sentiment prevalent among the community. The community was not monolithic: the Russian-speaking congregations wanted to maintain the traditional relationship with the ROC. They practised Russian Orthodox traditions, and this was also an argument for a number of Estonian clergymen during the early years of statehood why the church should remain associated with the ROC.

Nevertheless, the majority of the community decided to turn its back on the tradition. Criticism from the Russian congregations as well as Russian émigrés who had fled to Estonia from Russia intensified the conviction that an independent country had to have an independent church. Similar opposition played out in the Lutheran Church, where the Baltic German clergy that had run the church for centuries and rank-and-file members tried to maintain the same ethos and ecclesiastical administration privilege. An ethnic Estonian bishop Jakob Kukk and a new church administration were elected in 1919 in their place.

The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church began to restructure itself as an autonomous organization as soon as Estonia proclaimed statehood. A democratic system was adopted in congregations, following a system approved in 1917 at a church assembly in Moscow. Democratic principles were also used in the governance of the churches, with the laity included alongside the clergy.

The aspiration for canonical independence came with the intention of observing all canonical principles, and representatives of both the Russian and Serbian church were contacted in regard to the matter. As the only exception, the head of the Church of England was also contacted to sound out possibilities to organize church affairs in conjunction with the Anglicans, but for understandable reasons this did not come to fruition.

The sources cited in this article show that the ROC took a strained view of the Estonian Orthodox community's demands, since they were interested in preserving the existing structure. Only after pressure from the community was it decided to establish a separate diocese in Estonia and grant Estonian congregations limited autonomy in administrative issues. They now had an ethnic Estonian bishop, but ordainment of new bishops and further development of the church seemed increasingly uncertain on the backdrop of the turmoil in Russia. In 1922, the question of autocephaly was again raised and this time, Estonians, along with the Finns, reached out to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The patriarch granted autonomy to the Estonian and Finnish churches in 1923, which although short of full autocephaly, gave congregations total internal freedom to administer their affairs, which is what the community had desired, and therefore it was often seen both in the public eye and within the church as tantamount to autocephaly. For the Estonian Orthodox Church, autonomy meant the opportunity to begin substantively building the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church in line with the ethos of Estonian Orthodoxy and its traditions. As a concession to Russian congregations, a Russian diocese was formed to maintain their traditions, and an ethnic Russian, Yevsevi, was appointed bishop of those congregations. This was a greater concession than was made in Finland, where the bishop Seraphim, who had backed the status quo as a part of the ROC, was dismissed from his post in December 1923 due to not complying with the language requirements.

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