

Georgy Smirnov

RETURNING TO LUIGI RUSCA'S PROJECT FOR ST NICHOLAS CHURCH IN TALLINN

In volume 3 of *History of Estonian Art*¹ I was responsible for the chapter dedicated to the architecture of Orthodox churches in the period from 1770 to 1840 (with a co-authorship of Linda Lainvoo). During this period, one of the most significant buildings in the history of Orthodox church architecture in Estonia is St Nicholas Church in Tallinn. Its construction was preceded by a long and complicated planning stage. The main intrigue was related to a project for this church made by Luigi Rusca, a prominent Swiss-Italian architect active in Russia for a long period of time starting in 1783. The project was approved by Emperor Alexander I in 1807. At the time the chapter was written, its authors only had a brief description of the design, which was included with the cost estimate prepared by architect Erhard Gottfried Pauly and signed by Rusca.² The description was of a two-storey five-domed church with a square ground plan and porticos on the facades. Rusca's project was not executed and the current building was built according to plans prepared by Johann Friedrich Schatten between 1821 and 1827.

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1 *Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, 3 (1770–1840), ed. by Juhan Maiste (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2017).

2 National Archives of Estonia [Rahvusarhiiv, EAA].29.1.311, 15–20.



Fig. 1. Plans of St Nicholas Church in Tallinn.

Meanwhile the project for St Nicholas Church in Reval (Tallinn) can also be found in an album of designs that Rusca produced for various cities and towns in the Russian Empire. Dedicated to Emperor Alexander I, the album was published in St Petersburg in 1810³. The project is described on two sheets⁴: one for the two ground plans and another for the western facade. Indeed, Rusca's design is of a two-storey five-domed church, but one that is rather unusual for this type of building, which was widespread in the early 19th century architecture of Russia. The most impressive feature of Rusca's project is its extreme grandeur and – I would dare say – its experimental character. This based on the first storey, which is treated as a heavy

3 The album was published in two languages – French and Italian. The French name is as follows: *Recueil des dessins de différents batiments construits a Saint-Petersbourg, et dans l'intérieur de Russie, Par Louis Rusca, Architecte de Sa Majesté Impériale. Dédié a Sa Majesté Alexandre Ier, empereur et autocrate de toutes les russies* (Saint-Petersbourg, MDCCCX). The Italian name is as follows: *Raccolta dei disegni di diverse fabbriche costrutte in Pietroburgo, e nell' interno dell' impero russo, da Luigi Rusca, Architetto di Sua Maestá Imperiale. Dedicata a Sua Maestá Alessandro I, imperatore e autocratore di tutte le russie* (Pietroburgo, MDCCCX).

4 *Op.cit.*, H. Pl. XXXIII, XXXIV.

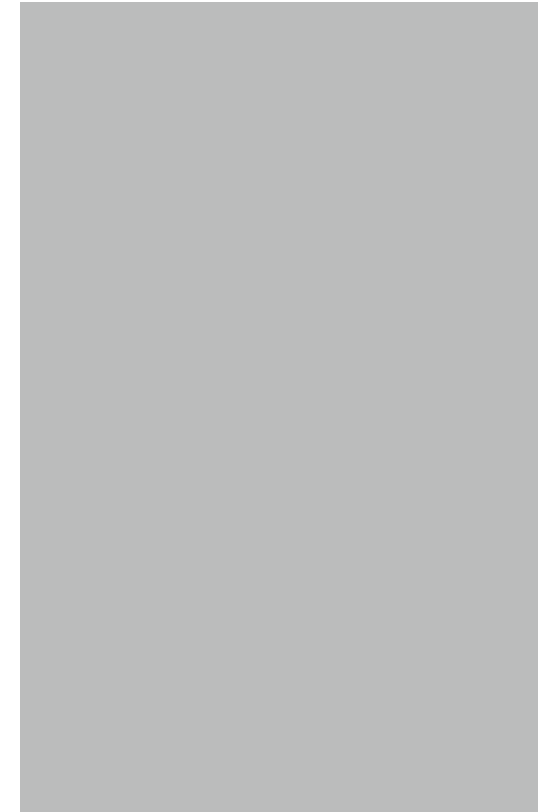


Fig. 2. Elevation of St Nicholas Church in Tallinn.

podium for the whole structure, being adorned with rustication, and the side porticos with Doric columns. Some rusticated surfaces are also used in the wall decoration of the second storey. Other five-domed churches by Rusca – those included in the album⁵ and the cathedral built in the Monastery of Transfiguration in Saratov (1815–1816, now demolished) – as well as a number of churches built by other architects⁶ differ greatly from this design. They have a more

5 The cathedrals in Cherkask (*op. cit.*, G. Pl. I–IV) and Simpheropol (*op.cit.*, H. Pl. XXX–XXXII).

6 Especially those designed by Carlo Rossi (the cathedral of Christ's Nativity Monastery in Tver and the cathedral of Transfiguration in Torzhok) and Vassiliy Stasov (Tansfiguration and Trinity cathedrals in St Petersburg).

conventional appearance of a one-storey well-balanced structure. The plain walls are emphasised with monumental porticos. The same features are characteristic of another church design in an album published in 1824⁷.

It seems that Luigi Rusca's unexecuted design for St Nicholas Church in Tallinn remains an isolated example in Russian early 19th century architecture. In any case, it is not related to the surviving church on Vene St, which was built according to the plans prepared by Johann Friedrich Schatten.

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⁷ *Sobranie planov, fasadov i profiley dlya stroeniya kamennyh tzerkvoey* (SPb., 1824), № XXVI.