Religious Heritage and Change in the North

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Heritigization and foreign diplomacy

Claiming a religious building to enhance Swedish–Russian contacts in the aftermath of the Cold War

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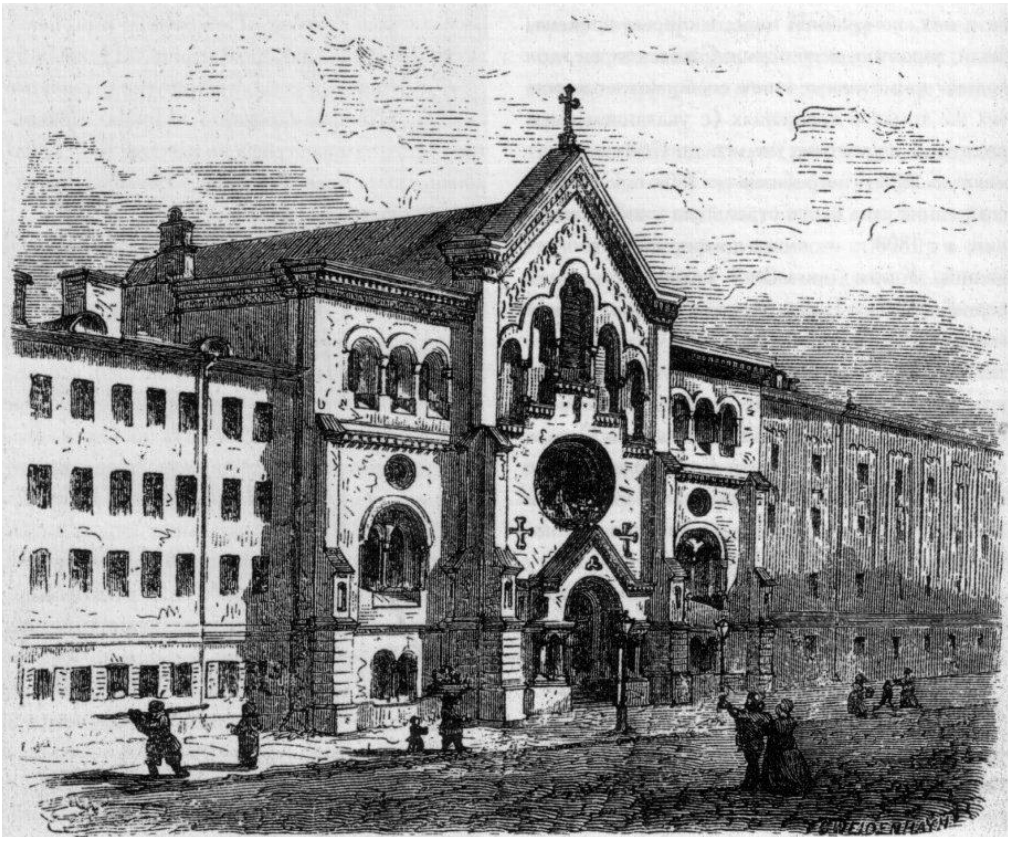
The article investigates the complex negotiation process regarding the renovation of St Catherine's church in St Petersburg. Additionally, the goal is to gain novel understanding of how former religious spaces can be transformed and highlight the various significances these structures may possess in different contexts, particularly at the junction of religion and cultural heritage. Built in 1865, the church served as a place of worship for the Swedish-speaking congregation for nearly eighty years before being repurposed as a sports school. Recently, Sweden has aimed to restore the church and utilize it as a centre for Swedish–Russian relations. The article examines the reasons and arguments for renovation, as well as the progress that has been made to date. Additionally, it explores the role of Sweden in Russia through the perspectives of various stakeholders, including members of the congregation, diplomats, politicians, architects and priests.

Introduction

The renovation of the Swedish Lutheran church of St Catherine in St Petersburg has been a prolonged and complex process, with work beginning in the mid-1990s and still ongoing as of 2023. Key players in the negotiations include the city of St Petersburg, Russian and Swedish government entities, and the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran congregation of St Catherine's. These negotiations have not been previously researched. In this article, we take our starting point in the history of St Catherine's and a theoretical framework from heritage studies and studies about the religious heritage complex. The idea of a religious heritage complex provides a conceptual tool for understanding how religious practices and material culture can have multiple layers of significance. This is particularly visible in the management of churches. The concept of the religious heritage complex challenges us to reconsider the connections between religion and heritage and urges us to review the processes by which heritage is constructed more generally. Furthermore, it helps us to see what is at stake for religious communities when they cooperate with heritage agents, and to explain why such cooperation sometimes works but other times results in conflict (Isnart and Cerezales 2020: 19; Hemel *et al.* 2022).

The aim of the article is to develop a new understanding of how desacralized church spaces can be given new significance by examining the negotiations regarding St Catherine's church and illuminating the roles it has played for various stakeholders. Additionally, the article aims to shed light on the intersection of religion and cultural heritage. The research questions are: How has the process evolved over time? What motives have been formulated and what



St Catherine's Church, published in *Förr och nu*, 1871.

role has the church's religious background played for those involved?

The article presents new research that builds upon our previous research on St Catherine's.[1] It is based on analyses of material that has been made available by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (UD). Before access was granted, the material in the form of draft agreements, memoranda, letters, emails, reports, etc. underwent security classification by the Ministry. In some of the documents, information has been omitted, for example, in draft agreements where only the title indicates the hidden content.[2] However, this has not been carried out to such an extent that it

1 For our published articles about St Catherine's church, we refer to the research project 'The Gateway to Russia' funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies and 'Changing Spaces' funded by the Polin Institute, Åbo Akademi University. See Nordbäck and Gunner 2016; Gunner and Nordbäck 2019, 2021.

2 In some of the documents, information has been omitted, for example in draft agreements where only the title indicates the hidden content. The Ministry's explanation has been that working papers do not count as public papers. Furthermore, some names of officials in the Russian bureaucracy as well as proposals relating mainly to finance in various investigations have been crossed out. In this article, individuals are only named when necessary, such as in connection with investigations or when official representatives from local and federal authorities have acted or made statements regarding the renovation issue.

has affected the results of the study. In addition, we have conducted ethnographic field studies in St Petersburg and interviewed several key figures.[3]

The article begins with a background and then delves into the various rounds of negotiations and describes the willingness and desire to renovate and use the church building for various purposes, providing insight into Swedish foreign policy during that period.

Background

St Catherine's church was one of St Petersburg's oldest Lutheran congregations, with roots dating back to the seventeenth century, when the area was a part of Sweden. The members of the Swedish-Finnish speaking congregation in Nyen, the fortified city at the mouth of River Neva, were subjects of the Swedish Crown. After the annexation of the area by the Russians, all Lutheran churches came under the rule of the Russian tsar. A Lutheran consistory was founded, and a new Church Law for all Lutheran churches in Russia was ratified in 1832. This structure lasted until the dissolution of the Lutheran churches during Soviet times (Nordbäck and Gunner 2016: 44–5; Werth 2014).

The location of St Catherine's church has always been in the Lutheran quarter near Nevsky Prospect, and the current church building was inaugurated in 1865. After the Russian Revolution, the church was confiscated, and the congregation dissolved in 1935. The building was then converted into a sports palace and further adapted in the 1960s for various sports activities, which resulted in the original church hall being divided horizontally by a floor.[4]

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about changes in religious practices in Russia. In 1990, legislation that had limited religious freedom since 1929 was repealed and replaced by a law that guaranteed citizens freedom of conscience and religion (Shterin 2000; Kääriäinen and Furman 2000). This created new opportunities for religious communities that were already established in Russia, as well as churches and religious communities from Europe and the United States to establish themselves or seek contact with communities in the country (Kääriänen 1998; Kotiranta 2000; Durham and Ferrari 2004; Turunen 2005; Fagan 2013). One result of the new legislation was the registration of the St Catherine Swedish Evangelical Lutheran congregation in December 1991.[5] The members of the congregation proclaimed themselves as the legal inheritors of the

3 The analysis presented in this article is primarily drawn from the documents obtained through UD. Furthermore, we have conducted interviews with members of the congregation and other key players involved in the renovation process. These interviews have provided a more detailed understanding of the events and processes described in the article.

4 Reconstruction work was carried out from 1964 to 1970. KIGOP (Committee for Supervision and Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments), appendix to attachment to fax from Consulate general in St Petersburg (CG) to UD/EC, 2001-05-25, dnr54. Brodersen 1994.

5 The newly formed congregation sought contact with the Church of Sweden to be considered as a part of the organization, the Church of Sweden Abroad, but this was not acknowledged by the Church of Sweden. In 1997, the congregation became an autonomous member of ELCROS, the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Russia and Other States, which has been a member of the Lutheran World Federation since 1989. For a more detailed description of this, see Gunner and Nordbäck 2021: 124–7.

church and attempted to gain access to the building. They were granted access to a smaller space, the original organ loft, where they gathered for their Sunday services. However, the sports schools continued to occupy the main space, and it was not always easy to share the building.[6]

In the early 1990s, as Sweden aimed to establish and strengthen its relations with the newly formed state of Russia, it initiated a search for a new location for its Consulate General in St Petersburg. The focus was on the former Swedish Quarter, which included the church, adjacent apartment buildings, and the former rectory. A company, Sweden House (or Dom Svetsii), was established to undertake the renovation of the complex.[7] The buildings were officially opened in 1997 by the Swedish prime minister, Göran Persson, but the church building was not included in the renovation project at that time. The Swedish Consulate General moved into the former rectory and the adjacent building was leased to law firms. Additionally, the Stockholm School of Economics began utilizing the building for executive MBA programmes in business management.[8]

6 Interview with the congregation's deputy chairman, Valeri Volodin, 4.7.2016. Gunner and Nordbäck private archive.

7 The ownership of the company was shared between the construction group Skanska with 49 per cent, the Swedish state 36 per cent and the city of St Petersburg 15 per cent. However, the ownership structure changed in the mid-2000s, when Skanska's part was bought by Ladoga Holding AB, a subsidiary of C&A Estates. Ekman 2018. 'Förutsättningarna för att med gemensamma offentliga och privata insatser återuppta S:ta Katarinas roll som ett nav för den svenska närvaron i S:t Petersburg förr & nu'. UD 2016, UD2016/1204046/EC, 6.

8 The programs are organised by Stockholm School of Economics Russia.

One reason the church was not renovated in the mid-1990s had to do with technical and practical considerations, but the situation was more complex. The primary issue was the use and ownership of the church at the time. With the Consulate General moving into the renovated rectory next door, the question of renovating the church was brought to the forefront of Swedish diplomatic policy. This led to years of negotiations, with repeated deadlines, unfulfilled agreements, and high-level discussions between Sweden and Russia.

The main objective of St Catherine's congregation during the 1990s and 2000s was to regain full access to the church building. This goal was aligned with the interests of other stakeholders, including members of the Swedish parliament. Several parliamentarians visited St Petersburg and were able to witness the poor condition of the building first-hand. One of them, Erling Bager, during a 2005 debate with Foreign Minister Jan Eliasson, highlighted the unpleasant smell of sweat that he encountered in the building, describing it as disgraceful. He questioned how long this unacceptable state of the building would be allowed to continue:

> There has been a Swedish church in St Petersburg since the eighteenth century. This church was designed by a Swedish architect, and the Swedish Consulate General is situated next door. During a long period of humiliation, however, the Russians have had the church as a sports hall, while Finland and Estonia have got their churches back.[9]

9 Riksdagens protokoll 2005/06:135, 2006-06-05, §15. The links between Finland and the Ingrian Church were historically strong, and when the opportunities

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The Church facade. Photo by Ekaterina Borisova.

In his speech, Bager emphasized the historical significance of Sweden's presence in St Petersburg. He argued that the political conditions during the Soviet era had degraded a piece of Swedish property, and that the unpleasant smell of sweat that he believed characterized the building was a humiliating symbol of this. The Foreign Minister, Jan Eliasson, reassured Bager that the church would have a brighter future, and described the initiatives taken by Sweden, but acknowledged that the process

arose to renovate churches and support congregations in Russia, a lot of support came, for example, from Finn Church Aid. Kuusniemi 2015: 33–6. All quotations are translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

had been delayed by technical and bureaucratic issues.[10] However, Eliasson's optimism for the renovation of St Catherine's church was not realized.

The first initiative

The renovation of the buildings surrounding St Catherine's church in the 1990s reinforced the idea of creating a specific location in St Petersburg where economic and cultural contacts between Sweden and Russia could be promoted. According to a 1995 proposal, 'Sweden has a particular interest in developing relations with the St Petersburg area, not least in view of the great potential for trade, and economic and cultural cooperation'.[11] This was further supported by the need for a 'natural base' where Swedish authorities and businesses could develop their relations with the St Petersburg area. This rationale was driven by the need to support Swedish authorities and businesses as well as Sweden's investment in Sweden House. Although the church was not included in the initial renovation plans, the place with the houses at Malaya Konyushennaya (Little Stable street) represented historic land. This location had been a place of worship and cultural exchange for Swedish-speaking residents of St Petersburg for over 200 years and was considered a concrete way of connecting Swedish–Russian history with the contemporary need for a Swedish–Russian cultural meeting place. Although the renovation of the church was not included in

10 The debate in the Parliament was initiated by the motion presented by Erling Bager and Runar Patriksson (The People's Party) concerning St Catherine's Church in St Petersburg. Motion 2005/06:U242. The motion was rejected on 5.4.2006, Utrikesutskottets betänkande 2005/06:UU15, 87–8.

11 Regeringens proposition 1994/95:78.

the first rounds of renovations, it was not forgotten, especially not among Swedish diplomats in Russia. After the inauguration of Sweden House and the location of the Consulate General in the former rectory, the question of the church's future developed into a political matter for Sweden and appeared on the agenda at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm.[12]

In August 1998, the Central and Eastern Europe unit of the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm held a consultation regarding St Catherine's church, attended by representatives from various departments, the Swedish Institute, the board of Sweden House, and the acting Consul General in St Petersburg. The minutes of the meeting indicate that various aspects were discussed, and decisions were made on how to proceed.[13] At the time, a small congregation and a sports school had the right to use the building, while the city of St Petersburg owned the property. However, neither the congregation nor the sports school were able to afford necessary repairs, and the newly appointed director of the sports school had indicated a willingness to vacate the premises. The Consul General believed that the city of St Petersburg might offer the building to Sweden, although the questions of ownership would be considerably more complicated than anticipated. There were arguments for and against Swedish involvement in the church building, as a neglected church could negatively affect Sweden's image and have consequences for political cooperation between Sweden and Russia, but not taking responsibility for the building could also lead to it falling into disrepair and being controlled by Russian commercial interests. If that occurred, Sweden would face the risk of losing control over the building's future use. Furthermore, if Sweden did not take responsibility for the church, 'the renovated Sweden House would be adjacent to a dilapidated Swedish church', which would negatively impact Sweden's image. The state of the church building was closely tied to the image of Sweden and neglecting it could result in detrimental effects on the political cooperation between Sweden and Russia, as was stated in the minutes.

> For a Swedish engagement, it was argued that it would be difficult for the Russian side to understand if Sweden neglects a building with historical and cultural ties to Sweden in the long term. The importance that Russia attaches to our shared history and culture should not be underestimated, and it was argued that it could be seen as politically important for Sweden to act on the issue. This was also emphasized by the importance of highlighting Russia's role in the Baltic Sea cooperation.[14]

To meet the demand for information about Sweden among Russians, the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm discussed increasing the presence of Swedish culture in St Petersburg. They could learn from other countries, such as the Netherlands, Finland and Denmark, that had or were in the process of establishing similar initiatives.[15] The

12 Hirdman 2006. 'Ett Sverigeinstitut i S:t Petersburg', 6. UD 2006-03-08, UD/2006/10086/EC.

13 Promemoria UD/EC 243/0/6, 1998-08-31.

14 Promemoria UD/EC 243/0/6, 1998-08-31.

15 These countries could serve as examples of smaller countries with geographical and historical ties to St Petersburg. Furthermore, the national centres had different forms of organization behind them, such as embassies, consulates, universities,

potential opening of a regular ferry route between St Petersburg and Stockholm would also require more efforts to provide information. However, the team had to consider the feasibility of investing in an information centre in St Petersburg, such as cost-effectiveness and funding options. They also talked about the possibility of utilizing aid funds, such as the Baltic Billions programme, for the church restoration project.[16]

The first investigation

The restoration project for St Catherine's church gained momentum in the following years, as documents highlighted the reasons for Sweden's investment in the building. The renovation was seen to contribute to the beautification of St Petersburg in preparation for its 300th anniversary celebration in 2003 and as a symbol of Sweden's commitment to preserving cultural heritage. It could also demonstrate Sweden's willingness to invest in the Baltic Sea region.[17] However, the financial aspect of the project remained unresolved.

An example of the many conversations and discussions surrounding the renovation plans was a meeting between Swedish prime minister, Göran Persson, and St Petersburg's governor, Vladimir Jakovlev, in Moscow in May 1999. The renovation was discussed during the meeting, and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs received clear signals from the Premier's office to handle the case with urgency.[18]

In February 2000, the Swedish government decided to investigate the feasibility of using St Catherine's church in St Petersburg for Sweden-related activities after its renovation, and the resources required for it.[19] It was also emphasized that the Swedish state would not be responsible for the day-to-day operations of the church. This decision reflected the advancement of the renovation project within the Swedish foreign administration, but the intended use of the renovated church and the justification for investing tax revenue in it needed further examination.[20]

A barter transaction

In the spring of 2001, the Consulate General in St Petersburg had ongoing discussions with various city committees and the next few years, up to 2005, were dominated by work on draft agreements, negotiating at the federal level, setting deadlines, and trying to find a new space for the sports school. A report from the embassy in Moscow in June 2001 mentioned a conversation between President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Göran Persson, which took place during a summit between

independent organizations or NGOs. Hirdman 2006: 34–40.

16 Baltic Billion Fund 1 was part of the government's employment bill in 1996. The fund aimed to strengthen cooperation between the state and businesses, increase trade in the Baltic Sea region, as well as reduce unemployment rate with half in Sweden until the year 2000. After two years, the government established the Baltic Billion Fund 2, which focused solely on bolstering business ventures in the region. In terms of funding for the renovation of St Catherine's Church, only the Baltic Billion Fund 1 was a viable option. Åkerlund 2017: 261–3.

17 Arbetspapper UD/EIM/EC, 1999-05-31.

18 Arbetspapper UD/EIM/EC, 1999-05-31.

19 Protokoll vid regeringssammanträde II:5 2000-02-03, UD1999/1575/EC. Despite multiple requests to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we have yet to be granted access to the investigation itself.

20 The Swedish Ambassador to Egypt, Sven G. Linder, was appointed as the investigator and the law firm of Mannheimer Swartling aided with an examination of existing Russian legislation.

the EU and Russia in Moscow in May 2001. Among the topics discussed was the future of St Catherine's church. A few weeks later, the Swedish ambassador in Moscow met Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Aleksandr Avdeyev, and was informed of a request by Putin to find a suitable location for a Russian Orthodox congregation in Stockholm. According to Avdeyev, Metropolitan Kiril (then chairman of the Russian Orthodox Department for External Affairs) was aware of an 'excellent and cheap' church in Stockholm that would be beneficial to the Russian congregation.[21] The question was raised of whether the Swedish side would be willing to buy this church and give it to the congregation in exchange for St Catherine's church in St Petersburg. Avdeyev identified the church in question as St Peter's church, which was not in use, located in central Stockholm and belonging to the Church of Sweden. But in fact, it was a Methodist church that was still in use by its congregation. The origins of the idea that this church was for sale are unclear.[22]

The proposed 'barter transaction' was also reported by the Russian press, which sparked some public debate. An article entitled 'Putin offers solution to church dispute' was published in the *St Petersburg Times* in late May, which stated that Putin had discussed the issue of St Catherine's church being returned to the congregation that built it and suggested that 'Putin wants the Swedish government to repay the spiritual debt with a piece of land in Stockholm, where a Russian Orthodox church would be built'. This statement by the Russian president had, according to the article, upset the congregation (Kovalyev 2001). Despite the public debate, negotiations continued at both the local and federal levels. The Consulate General had close contacts with the relevant St Petersburg ministries, particularly the property committee (KUGI), and with the congregation. The embassy in Moscow was responsible for the negotiations at the federal level, with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Eastern and Central Europe (EC) unit in Stockholm. Since an agreement at the federal level was necessary, the embassy in Moscow bore the most responsibility. However, the fact that the renovation of St Catherine's church became a federal issue complicated the chances of finding a quick solution. Later, the congregation criticized the Swedish government's inability to complete the process, suspecting that the government had not done enough. However, the material from the Foreign Ministry indicates that delays were not due to a lack of effort and initiative, but rather the opposite. The Swedish side set several deadlines in the hope of motivating and speeding up the process on the Russian side.

Time pressure

The years 2002–3 were marked by ongoing negotiations to secure two major agreements. The first agreement concerned the establishment of a Swedish information and culture centre that would be in the church building. The second agreement dealt with the use and division of the church building itself. Despite the lack of signed agreements,

21 The Embassy in Moscow to EC/UD, 2001-06-11, dnr395; letter from the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Alexander Avdejev to Ambassador Sven Hirdman, 2001-06-07.

22 In 2020 the chairman of St Peter's congregation, after consulting with other members, states that they were unaware that the church had been left unused or that it had been the subject of plans at the Russian government level. Email between G. Gunner and the chairman of the board of St Peter's congregation in September 2020. Gunner and Nordbäck private archive.

the Swedish government made the decision in December 2002 to allocate SEK 35 million for the renovation of St Catherine's church, in the expectation that the agreements would be signed soon. The Swedish side had, in principle, approved the text of the agreement on establishing an information and cultural centre and was waiting for the Russian bureaucratic process to be completed. The decision in December 2002 implied that the agreements had to be completed by 31 August 2003. Additionally, the Swedish National Heritage Board would be responsible for the upcoming renovation.[23] The Russian authorities were informed of the decision by the Swedish government in January 2003.[24] While the goal of contributing to the beautification of St Petersburg for its jubilee year in 2003 had been proposed, and the necessary funds had been allocated, the gift of a renovated church could not be handed over that year because of the unresolved agreements.

The work continues

The Swedish diplomats worked tirelessly to meet the goal of finalizing the agreements by the summer of 2003. However, as delays in the negotiations during the spring of 2003 continued, new deadlines had to be set. Doubts began to arise among the staff at the embassy in Moscow regarding the course of action if the agreement process was not completed on time.

> This raises the question of how we on the Swedish side should – and can – act in a situation where the Russian process is *almost* but not completely finished by 31 August. Let's say that the case is then with the government apparatus and there is only one week, or just a few days, left until a formal Russian decision on signing. What do we do then? Can we then let the entire project fail after having negotiated the issue for almost five years?[25]

The unit for Central and Eastern Europe at the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm evaluated various scenarios and sought guidance from the prime minister's office, as the premier had been personally involved in the case.[26] Two options were presented to the PM office: to extend the deadline or to stick to the one already set. Both options had their advantages and disadvantages, ending years of negotiations because of bureaucratic obstacles or setting an unfortunate precedent by extending the deadline.[27] The government chose option B, to extend the deadline, and the new date was set for October 2003.[28] However, even this deadline passed without any signed agreements.[29] No further deadline was set. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs may have recognized the futility of continuing to put pressure on the Russian authorities, or perhaps the Swedish negotiators believed that a signing was imminent. The embassy in Moscow held out hope until April 2004

23 The 35 million SEK came from the Baltic Sea Billion 1 which would expire on 31 December 2002. The assignment to the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ), 2002-12-12, UD1999/57/EC.
24 Embassy in Moscow to EC/UD 2003-01-17, dnr24.
25 Embassy in Moscow to EC/UD, 2003-08-06, dnr348, italics in the original.
26 Embassy in Moscow, 2003-08-14, dnr114 and Arbetspapper EC/UD, 2003-08-14.
27 Arbetspapper EC/UD, 2003-08-14.
28 EC/UD to RAÄ, Utkast till regeringsbeslut 2003-08-28, UD2003/xxxx/EC.
29 Regeringsbeslut II:2, 2003-10-16, UD2003/49785/EC.

that the agreement could be completed by autumn at the latest, but still no agreement was reached. There was then no further discussion of the agreement until the following year, 2005. Meanwhile, changes were taking place in St Petersburg that eventually gave the congregation access to the entire building. These local developments had an impact on the ongoing efforts to establish a Swedish cultural centre in the church.

A new investigation

The efforts to gain access to St Catherine's church were hindered by the presence of sports schools in the building,[30] but in 2005 the congregation successfully negotiated a deal with KUGI for the gratuitous use of the entire building. This marked a new situation for the congregation of about forty members. In February 2005, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) re-engaged in the church matter[31] and the issue was discussed during a meeting between President Putin and Prime Minister Persson in September 2005.[32] The case was then passed on to the city administration in St Petersburg, which urged the Swedish side to contact the government administration in Moscow. Despite renewed contacts, the process in Moscow moved slowly.

The Swedish side then launched a new investigation to assess the conditions for creating a Swedish cultural centre in St Catherine's church in St Petersburg. The investigation, led by Sven Hirdman, an experienced ambassador in Moscow, aimed to analyse the interest and provide the conditions for establishing such a centre and give recommendations that could form the basis for decisions.[33]

In his investigation, completed in June 2006, Hirdman emphasized the importance of good relations with Russia, a neighbouring country that Sweden has a long, shared history with. However, he also noted that there was a lack of understanding between the two countries, which was due to factors such as limited personal contacts, a negative image of Russian and Soviet history, and cultural differences.[34]

To address these issues and improve Swedish–Russian relations, Hirdman proposed the creation of a natural meeting place between Swedish and Russian culture and social life. This, he argued, would be the main motivation for establishing a Swedish institute in Russia.

The investigator emphasized the need for increased contacts and understanding between Sweden and Russia, proposing that St Catherine's church could serve as a physical meeting place for cultural exchange. He presented two proposals for how the space in the church building could be utilized following renovations. The first proposal suggested retaining the floor in the church hall or lowering it a few metres, while the second proposal suggested removing the floor and recreating the church hall. Both proposals outlined how the various spaces could be arranged and provided information on the necessary renovations and rebuilding, as well as estimated costs for the operation of the cultural centre. Hirdman favoured the first proposal, arguing that the second proposal would be too large for both the congregation's services and the activities of the

30 Dom Fizkultury imeni V. A. Maygkova and the children's sports school Olimpiyskogo Reserva.
31 CG to UD/EC, 2005-02-17, dnr1.
32 Promemoria EC/UD, 2006-02-07.
33 Beslut UD 2006/10086/EC, 2006-03-08. Uppdragsbeskrivning EC/UD, appendix 1, Hirdman 2006, 27.
34 Hirdman 2006: 9–10.

The church hall with the disputed floor, 2019. Photo by Fredrik Ekman.

cultural institute.[35] He also acknowledged the potential concerns of the appropriateness of placing a secular institute in a church but downplayed this issue by noting the growing trend of desacralization of churches in Sweden and the common use of churches for various purposes in Russia.

The investigation into the establishment of a Swedish cultural centre in St Catherine's church in St Petersburg was sent for review in August 2006 with a one-month deadline for responses.[36] The responses from various organizations and the congregation were overwhelmingly supportive of the idea. The congregation expressed appreciation for the Swedish state's willingness to finance the renovation of the church and approved of the establishment of a cultural centre but rejected the proposal to retain the middle floor installed during the Soviet era. They saw it as a symbol of a painful era that they wanted to erase from memory. Retaining the floor would perpetuate a painful period in the congregation's history. Additionally, reference was made to the ongoing process in Russia of returning and resacralizing various church buildings. The congregation emphasized that possession of the church was crucial for their long-term survival and that a secularization of the church by a cultural institute could be viewed negatively by others, especially in the context of Russia's efforts to resacralize its churches.[37]

The Consulate General's response addressed practical issues related to the renovation, such as the need for space for material transportation and the need to

35 Hirdman 2006: 43–49.

36 UD Remiss, dnr/D/2006/40927/EC, 2006-08-21.

37 'Utlåtande av S:t Katarina församling gällande ett svenskt kulturinstitut i S:t Katarina kyrka i S:t Petersburg', 2006-09-20, dnr06/45938 and UD/2006/40927/EC.

overhaul the heating system shared with the adjacent building, the Lidvall house.[38] They also suggested that the ecclesiastical character of the entrance should be given a neutral design to attract visitors and that the floor should be retained. They noted that there was interest in the city for innovative architectural solutions for churches and that St Petersburg University had already contacted the consulate to discuss involving architecture students in the design of the church premises.[39] Following this round of review, Hirdman was tasked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to finalize negotiations with the congregation in January 2007.[40]

The turn

The negotiations continued in 2007 and Hirdman frequently visited St Petersburg and Moscow. However, the congregation's attitude towards the plans began to change. In March, the church board decided to send a letter to KUGI and withdraw its support for the cultural centre. The reason for this withdrawal, according to the Consulate General, was the congregation's growing belief that they would be able to pay for the renovation on their own. This, along with the congregation's perception of the Foreign Ministry's inactivity, contributed to the decision.[41] The board officially withdrew its support, but still chose to participate in further discussions. In retrospect, it is possible that the board's actions were a tactic to put pressure on the diplomatic channels, specifically the Foreign Ministry.

In May 2007, there was a principal agreement on the federal level, and the only remaining task was to agree on the joint use of the premises. Hirdman was tasked with drafting this agreement and the congregation was contacted in June.[42] By the end of the summer, a draft agreement on how to divide the space between the institute and the congregation was ready. The draft had two proposals; the main one allocated 1,156 square metres for the centre and 693 square metres for the congregation, while the alternative proposal allocated 1,452 square metres for the cultural centre and 140 square metres for the congregation's private use. Both proposals suggested joint use of some of the area, either the upper part of the church hall or the restored one. Hirdman stated that 'the main proposal appeared to be more functional for both the Swedish Institute and the congregation'.[43]

In the autumn of 2007, the Foreign Ministry's records on the matter are limited. In November, the embassy in Moscow received a letter from the Russian Foreign Service announcing that the city of St Petersburg planned to transfer the entire building to the congregation, following their withdrawal of support for the cultural

38 The architect Fredrik Lidvall (1870–1945) was commissioned in 1901 by the St Catherine's congregation to design an apartment building with a separate courtyard building to the left of the church (as seen from the front). The building was inaugurated in November 1905. Jangfeldt 1998: 167f., 244–5.

39 Consulate General to UD-EC, dnr44, 2006-09-25.

40 Letter to the Church Board from Sven Hirdman, 2007-06-19. Gunner and Nordbäck private archive.

41 Consulate General to UD/EC, 2007-04-13, dnr18.

42 Email Sven Hirdman to UD, 2007-05-21; letter from Sven Hirdman to the Church Board, Stockholm 2007-06-19. Gunner and Nordbäck private archive.

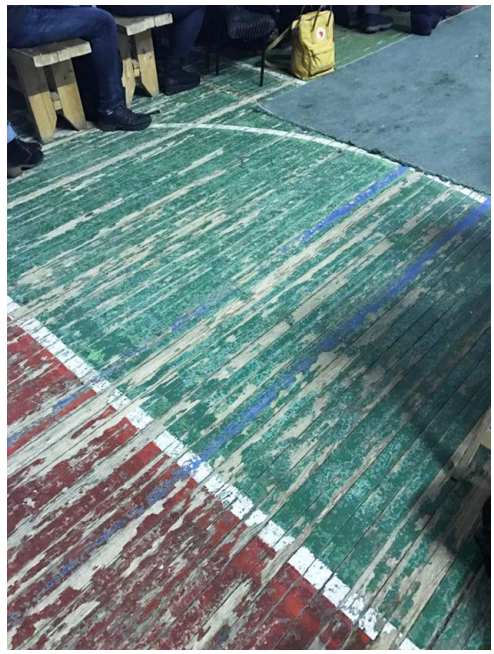
43 'Samutnyttjandeavtal mellan Sverigeinstitutet och Katarinaförsamlingen', 2007-10-05, 3–4. Gunner and Nordbäck private archive.

centre and their willingness to finance the renovation of the building.[44] The reasons for the congregation's change of stance were probably multi-faceted. The formal transfer of the building took place between October and November 2007 and was completed a year later. Despite scattered attempts to continue negotiations, Hirdman's investigation lost its relevance once the congregation received full rights to the church building.

A third investigation

In November 2016, the Foreign Ministry decided to launch a new investigation 'to support St Catherine's church in St Petersburg', which was led by Fredrik Ekman, the head of office for the Foundation for Business Promotion in Russia (SAUR).[45] The investigation 'aimed to provide concrete recommendations for gathering a broad and long-term group of stakeholders around the future use of the church'.[46]

A key difference was that the new investigation emphasized that 'the future use of the church should not be financed by the state'. Instead, it focused on exploring whether the renovation project could be realized through financial support from the private business sector. To this end, the investigation identified six potential donor categories, including Swedish companies, families and foundations with links to Russia, both historically and in the present, and suggested various activities that could take place in the church such as exhibitions, collaborations with universities, cultural exchange and dialogue with the congregation.[47]



A close-up of the floor in the church hall with the visible remnants from its past use as a sports school, 2016. Photo by Carola Nordbäck.

In the autumn of 2019, the Foreign Ministry commissioned a legal investigation by Advokat Lexner AB to assess the legal conditions for a sustainable investment in the renovation of St Catherine's church. The focus of this investigation was on the legal issues central to Swedish investments rather than the future use and activities of the building.[48]

44 The Embassy in Moscow to UD/EC, 2007-11-12, dnr161.

45 The foundation had been established by private donors to provide support for the education conducted at the Stockholm School of Economics Russia (SSER). This educational institution rented premises in Sweden House and contacts were already developed between SAUR and UD-EC.

46 Protokollsutdrag 2016-11-11, UD2016/12046/UD/EC.

47 Ekman 2018: 13.

48 Promemoria 2019-09-24, UD2019/12673/EC. The survey is a thorough review of current laws and regulations and was reported to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 2021.

Conclusions

This article has shed new light on the intersection of religion and cultural heritage by analysing the negotiation process around the renovation of St Catherine's church in St Petersburg. It has shown how the process evolved over time and what role the church's religious past has played in the negotiations. Thereby, the study has provided new insights into the significance of St Catherine's church in the context of Swedish foreign policy. It has uncovered a complex and prolonged process between Sweden and Russia, in which the church and congregation played a central role in negotiations between the two countries. Apart from the congregation, there have been many people involved in this story: diplomats, businessmen, parliamentarians, ministers of state and foreign affairs, a future patriarch, a president, architects, lawyers, priests, directors and numerous other office-holders and some scholars. Years of negotiations with repeated deadlines, never signed contracts and agreements, hopes and dashed hopes, top-level corridor talks between Sweden and Russia took place.

It has become clear that the Swedish state aimed to gain access to the building as a platform for promoting Swedish culture and strengthening Swedish–Russian relations. Swedish politicians and diplomats wanted this space to be filled with 'Swedishness', and as a small country compared with Russia it is maybe not such a far-fetched thought to think that the 'church-project' was more important to Sweden than to Russia.

The analysis of the negotiations regarding St Catherine's church has highlighted the symbolic importance of the building. Through the process, it has been revealed how cultural memories were constructed, used and erased. The arguments presented by the Swedish state, based on historical continuity and a long religious tradition, can be understood as constructed and activated aspects of cultural memory that were emphasized within the national narrative of Sweden.

Since 1991, the congregation has considered itself the rightful heir to the church building. For its members, it was essential for the church to regain its former status as a religious building. The period during the Soviet era and the years until the sports schools moved out of the building were seen as an interruption. The congregation sought to safeguard a Lutheran cultural heritage and referred to a long Swedish history as the direct successor to the oldest Lutheran congregation in the area, with roots dating back to 1632. This historical heritage was embodied in the building that was consecrated in 1865 and needed to be restored to its former glory. The symbolic importance of the floor played a crucial role in the outcome of the process. The small congregation stood up to the Swedish government and diplomatic efforts, prioritizing the needs of the church and its congregation over political concerns.

The church was (and still is) owned by the city of St Petersburg. The right to use it was eventually granted the Swedish Lutheran Congregation, at first together with the sports schools, and after the sport schools finally left in 2005 to the whole building. Therefore, Sweden had to make agreements with the city and the congregation to gain access to the premises and on top of that the Swedish side considered it necessary to make an agreement also on federal level, to secure the investment of Swedish tax revenues.

The study raises several questions about the reasons behind the failure of the renovation attempts and the significance of St Catherine's church in relation to Swedish

foreign policy. One of the main questions is why the congregation rejected the proposal put forward by Hirdman. The documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggest that the renovation failed because of the congregation's refusal. However, it is worth noting that the proposal was not particularly beneficial to the congregation, as the area allocated for church activities was significantly smaller than the area set aside for the cultural centre. Despite the initial enthusiasm for negotiations, the small congregation ultimately proved to have a stronger position than the Swedish diplomatic efforts had anticipated.

It is unclear whether the members of the congregation intended to put an end to Hirdman's proposal, or if they felt ignored during the negotiation process. In retrospect, it appears that the congregation was trying to gain a stronger negotiating position.

Another question is whether the renovation project was of such decisive importance for diplomatic contacts between Sweden and Russia. Who had the most interest in renovating the church and establishing a Swedish cultural institute? It was important to Swedish politicians and the Swedish foreign administration, but it is less clear whether it held the same importance on the Russian side. From the perspective of a great power and a small state, Russia may have been more important to Swedish foreign policy than Sweden was to Russian policy (Kragh 2018). This raises the question of why the effort was so strongly tied to a church building and whether the Swedish Lutheran history and identity, or the location of the church in proximity to other buildings connected to Swedish activities and relationships played the more important role.

In the introduction to this article, the concept of the religious heritage complex was introduced as a theoretical framework for the phenomenon under study. This term describes the intricate and complex relationships between religion and cultural heritage, and how various actors formulate preservation claims. The case of St Catherine's church demonstrates how a church building can become subject to multiple preservation claims that sometimes collaborate, but also clash in various ways. While all actors agree on the importance of preserving the building as a whole, the example of the floor illustrates how their ambitions for future use can diverge.

The future of restoration efforts for St Catherine's church is uncertain owing to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Would anyone be willing to invest money and resources in renovating a church with ties to a shared Swedish–Russian history in the current political climate? However, it is possible that the church project could serve to improve strained diplomatic relations between the two countries. The future of relations between Russia and its neighbouring countries is uncertain, and it remains to be seen when the war will end. The timing of restoration efforts has played a crucial role in their failure; the Sweden House project, initiated in the mid-1990s, initially included plans for the church, but they were later dropped. After years of negotiations and investigations, a solution seemed close when the congregation withdrew their support a decade later. And ten years later, with a new investigation and legal aspects clarified, plans and hopes were dashed again. Despite the setbacks, St Catherine's church has stood for over 150 years, and it is likely that it will continue to stand for years to come. ■

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