



“That Vast Empire”

THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH IN RUSSIA

Russian Latter-day Saints have built on a foundation of prophecy to establish the Church in their country.

By James A. Miller

Church History Department

Latter-day Saints in Russia reached an important milestone in 2011 as their country’s first stake was created in Moscow. More than a thousand Church members, missionaries, and friends excitedly gathered together to sustain their new leaders and express their gratitude that their nation’s capital would take its place among the stakes of Zion spread across the globe. Anticipation grew as Yakov Boyko was called and sustained as stake president with Vladimir Astashov and Viktor Kremenchuk as his counselors.

A wave of emotion swept over the congregation as Vyacheslav Protopopov was presented as the stake patriarch, the first native Russian patriarch in Russia. Hands shot up in the air as his name was read for a sustaining vote, and some almost started clapping for joy. For the first time, Russian priesthood leaders received the keys and authority that Latter-day Saints in stakes elsewhere in the world enjoy. A new chapter in Russian Church history began as the leadership of the Church in Moscow was now firmly in Russian hands.

Prophecy

The path to this significant day in Russian Church history traces back to the early days of the Restoration. In 1843 the Prophet Joseph Smith called Elder Orson Hyde of the

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and George J. Adams on a mission to Russia “to introduce the fullness of the Gospel to the people of that vast empire, and [to this] is attached some of the most important things concerning the advancement and building up of the kingdom of God in the last days, which cannot be explained at this time.”¹ However, the Prophet’s Martyrdom in 1844 interrupted plans to complete the mission, and the Prophet’s plans regarding the gospel destiny of “that vast empire” remained unfulfilled.²

Preparation

Still, in the 168 years between that first mission call and the creation of the first stake in Russia, Latter-day Saints from different backgrounds helped prepare the way to share the gospel with the people of Russia. In 1895, Swedish missionary August Höglund arrived in St. Petersburg to teach Johan Lindlöf, who had corresponded with the Scandinavian Mission and asked for missionaries after learning about the Church in his native Finland. Two days after meeting Elder Höglund and talking with him through the night, Johan and his wife, Alma, asked to be baptized. On June 11, 1895, Elder Höglund accompanied them to the banks of the Neva River. Unable to find a quiet, secluded location for the baptism, the group knelt in prayer to ask for the Lord’s help. Miraculously the boats and people began to leave



Depiction by a Russian artist of Elder Francis M. Lyman's 1903 dedicatory prayer in the Summer Garden in St. Petersburg.

the area. After the baptism, Sister Lindlöf said, “I feel so happy! I know that the Lord has forgiven me.”³ Johan and Alma thus became the first converts to be baptized in Russia.

Several years later, encouraged by the Lindlöfs’ conversion and social reforms planned by the Russian government, Elder Francis M. Lyman (1840–1916) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles initiated plans to send missionaries to the Russian Empire. In 1903, while serving as president of the European Mission, Elder Lyman traveled to the Russian Empire and dedicated the land for the preaching of the gospel. He offered prayers in St. Petersburg and in Moscow on August 6 and 9, asking the Lord to bless the rulers of the land and the many peoples of the empire, “in whose veins the blood of Israel flows generously.”⁴ He also prayed that “the hearts of the sincere and honest might be turned to seek for the truth, and petitioned the Lord to send servants full of wisdom and faith to declare the Gospel to the Russians in their own language.”⁵

Elder Lyman sent missionary Mikhail Markov to Riga, Latvia—then part of the Russian Empire—and wrote to Church headquarters expressing his hope to call missionaries to Russia soon. Church leaders in Salt Lake City, however, felt that more careful consideration was needed before sending missionaries to Russia, where it was illegal

to preach anything that contradicted Russian orthodoxy. Brother Markov soon left Riga at the order of local officials.⁶ Eventually, social and political tensions in Russia, exacerbated by the strain of World War I, led to a series of revolutions and a civil war that engulfed Russia in violence. The formation of the Soviet Union and the eventual Cold War made any further attempt to send missionaries to Russia impossible.

However, even during the Soviet period, Latter-day Saints continued the preparation to introduce the restored gospel in Russia. One such individual was Andre Anastasion, an emigrant from Odessa, Ukraine, who began translating the Book of Mormon into Russian after his baptism in 1918. After visiting Moscow in 1970, Andre wrote, “Twice in the night I stood on Red Square and implored the Lord to open the way for the Gospel to be taken to the Russian people, whom I saw everywhere moving in masses, poorly clad, sombre, with heads down.”⁷ The first edition of the Russian Book of Mormon, based largely on Andre’s work, was published in 1981. In time, many Russians would accept the message of the Book of Mormon, becoming pioneers in their own land to help fulfill the hopes and prayers of others on their behalf.

Pioneers

In 1989, Yuri and Liudmila Terebenin of St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad) and their daughter, Anna, were visiting friends in Budapest, Hungary. A Latter-day Saint friend invited them to church, where they felt the Spirit and decided to meet with the missionaries. They were eventually baptized. Though initially the only members of the Church in St. Petersburg, the Terebenins were not left alone for long. Members of the Church from Finland were already sharing the gospel with Russians, including Anton Skripko, who became the first Russian baptized in Russia.

At the time, Russia was experiencing political change, and Americans living and working in Moscow began to reach out to their Russian friends and acquaintances. Dohn Thornton met Galina Goncharova in 1989, and religion became a topic of discussion between them. Brother Thornton later recalled,

PROPHECIES CONCERNING THE CHURCH IN RUSSIA

“As I gave [Galina] the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith pamphlet, the most incredible thing happened. It was [as] if all the light in the room at that moment focused on the book. The Spirit came over us and [she] started to cry.”⁸ Galina told him that she felt the book was from God. She began attending church and was baptized in June 1990, becoming the first convert baptized in Moscow.

As Russians from St. Petersburg, Vyborg, Moscow, and other cities joined the Church, a new chapter opened in the history of the Church in Russia. On April 26, 1990, Elder

his Son Jesus Christ, and each of us will be resurrected.”⁹ In June, Vyacheslav, Galina (his wife), and Tamara were baptized. From 1995 to 1998, Brother Efimov served as Russia’s first native mission president.

Growth

Led by leaders of “wisdom and faith,” in fulfillment of Elder Lyman’s 1903 dedicatory prayers, the Church grew steadily after missionaries entered Russia in early 1990. Faithful Russians accepted the responsibility to serve their friends and neighbors. As



1930:
“I bear witness that there are thousands of the blood of Israel in that land [Russia], and God is preparing the way for them.” —Elder Melvin J. Ballard (1873–1939) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles¹⁵

1843: Joseph Smith calls missionaries to take the gospel to Russia. His martyrdom in 1844 interrupts these plans.



1903: Elder Francis M. Lyman of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles dedicates the Russian Empire for the preaching of the gospel.

1917: The Bolsheviks topple the Provisional Government that followed the abdication of the tsar, sparking the 1917–22 Russian Civil War.



1922: The Soviet Union is formally organized.

TIME LINE

Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve offered a prayer of rededication for Russia in St. Petersburg, reaffirming the dedication that Elder Lyman performed nearly a century earlier and asking the Lord to extend the blessings of the gospel to the people.

Also in the spring of 1990, Tamara Efimova of St. Petersburg brought the missionaries to her home after meeting them at a friend’s home. Her father, Vyacheslav Efimov, was skeptical at first that these young men could teach him anything new about God. However, he became impressed by their gospel message. He wrote: “[It] gave me the opportunity to receive answers to my own questions and, most important, to understand that God loves each of us—we are his children and he has given us a Savior,

districts were established in many cities, leaders such as Fidrus Khasbiulin instructed, inspired, and supported the Saints. Brother Khasbiulin, who joined the Church in 1994, served as the first branch president in Rostov-na-Donu, from 1995 to 1997, when he was called as president of the Rostov Russia District. As district president, he emphasized strengthening families and took a special interest in serving the youth, helping them prepare to serve missions and eventually marry in the temple.¹⁰

Temples

Russian Latter-day Saints did not let the lack of a temple in their own country prevent them from participating in the ordinances of the house of the Lord. For more



1995:
“You meet where you can now, but you will live to see chapels and stakes. You will see a temple in the Lord’s time.” —President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles¹⁶



than 15 years, the nearest temples were the Stockholm Sweden and Freiberg Germany Temples, although members in the Russian Far East continue to attend the Seoul Korea Temple. Difficulties with visas, long distances, and cost of travel made temple attendance no frequent experience.

In December 1991, the family of Andrei and Marina Semionov of Vyborg became the first Russian family to be sealed in the temple. Brother Semionov said, “A special joy came into our lives after we were sealed for eternity in the Stockholm Sweden Temple.”¹¹ For several years

she recalled. “They were small testimonies received individually by each person. But as a whole they helped us and gave momentum for further spiritual growth.”¹²

Eventually, a temple came closer to Russia when President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) dedicated the Helsinki Finland Temple in 2006. Then in 2010, Latter-day Saints throughout Russia rejoiced as President Thomas S. Monson dedicated the Kyiv Ukraine Temple, the first in the former Soviet Union, making temple blessings more accessible to faithful Russian Latter-day Saints.



1981: *The Book of Mormon is published in Russian.*



1991: *The Mormon Tabernacle Choir visits the Soviet Union. After their concert, the Russian authorities announce that the Church received national recognition on May 28.*

1991: *In December the Soviet Union officially dissolves, and the Russian Republic becomes the Russian Federation.*



he accompanied every group from Russia that attended the temple in Sweden.

Later, mission leaders began organizing groups to make the trip. The first such group from Moscow traveled to Stockholm in September 1993. These visits to the temple became highlights of devotion for Russian members across the country.

The Vershinin family from Nizhny Novgorod first visited the Stockholm Sweden Temple in 2000. After traveling to St. Petersburg, Sergey, Vera, and their daughter, Irina, joined a group of Russian Latter-day Saints from various cities and traveled by bus and ferry to reach the temple. At the temple, Irina participated in baptisms for the dead and was sealed to her parents. “The trip gave us testimonies and many blessings,”



Russian Latter-day Saints, organized as “Mormon Helping Hands,” help clean up the grounds of a school and lake near Moscow in 2013.

A Russian Church

The dedication of the temple in Ukraine strengthened the hopes of Russian members for the future of the Church in their country. After the dedication, Vladimir Kabanovy from Moscow said that “the Church will continue to grow—I envision the stakes of Zion here [in Russia].”¹³ Less than a year later, that vision became reality when Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles organized the Moscow Russia Stake. The next year, in September 2012, Elder Nelson organized a second stake, in St. Petersburg.

While these moments represented the culmination of 20 years of pioneering service and progress by the Russian Latter-day Saints, this is only the beginning of a new chapter

GROWTH IN MEMBERSHIP

1989: 20
1998: 9,179
2008: 19,946
2013: 21,888



CHURCH STATISTICS FOR RUSSIA*

Stakes: 2
Districts: 3
Wards and Branches: 98
Missions: 7
Nearest Temples: Kyiv Ukraine, Helsinki Finland, and Seoul Korea

*As of June 2013



2002: In September, President Gordon B. Hinckley becomes the first President of the Church to visit Russia.



2008: Anatoly Reshetnikov is called as the first native Russian Area Seventy.

2011: On June 5, the Moscow Russia Stake, the first stake in Russia, is organized.



2012: On September 9, the St. Petersburg Russia Stake is organized.

in the history of the Church in their country. After visiting in June 2012 with the Saints in the Europe East Area (which includes Russia), Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles bore witness that the Lord is guiding His work there: “His Spirit is brooding over this area. We will see things that we would never have supposed.”¹⁴ As Russian Latter-day Saint pioneers continue their service, live and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, and focus on the temple, additional stakes will form and the Church will continue to progress in their country. Perhaps we are seeing the fulfillment of what the Prophet Joseph Smith envisioned for the Latter-day kingdom of God in this vast empire. ■

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:41. It is unclear what “important things” the Prophet was referring to “which cannot be explained at this time”; he could have been referring to Russia itself, to the mission, or to the missionaries’ message.
2. George J. Adams chose not to accept the leadership of Brigham Young as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles following Joseph Smith’s death and left the Church.
3. August Höglund to Scandinavian Mission President, July 9, 1895,

Scandinavian Mission manuscript history, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, quoted in Kahlile Mehr, “Johan and Alma Lindlöf: Early Saints in Russia,” *Ensign*, July 1981, 23.

4. Joseph J. Cannon, “President Lyman’s Travels and Ministry: Praying in St. Petersburg for the Land of Russia,” *Millennial Star*, Aug. 20, 1903, 532.
5. Joseph J. Cannon, “President Lyman’s Travels and Ministry: The Visit to Moscow, the City of Churches,” *Millennial Star*, Aug. 27, 1903, 548.
6. See William Hale Kehr, “Mischa Markow: Missionary to the Balkans,” *Ensign*, June 1980, 29.
7. Andre Anastasion letter to the Council of the Twelve Apostles, Nov. 8, 1970, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
8. Dohn Thornton, “The Beginnings of the Moscow Branch,” in *Papers and Photographs Relating to the Beginning of the Church in Moscow, Russia* (1990–92), Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
9. Vyacheslav Efimov, in Gary L. Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel* (1997), 73.
10. See Allison Thorpe Pond, oral history of Fidrux Khabrakhmanovich Khasbiulin, Aug. 18, 2010, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
11. Andrei Semionov, in Gary Browning, “Pioneering in Russia,” *Ensign*, June 1997, 27.
12. From an interview with Irina Borodina, Mar. 6, 2013.
13. Vladimir Kabanovy, in Jason Swenson, “Russia’s First Stake a Powerful Symbol of Country’s Growth,” *Church News*, July 9, 2011, ldschurchnews.com.
14. D. Todd Christofferson, in video in “Spirit Attentive to Eastern European Pioneers,” Prophets and Apostles Speak Today, lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/unto-all-the-world/spirit-attentive-to-eastern-europe-pioneers.
15. Melvin J. Ballard, in Conference Report, Apr. 1930, 157.
16. Boyd K. Packer, as recorded by Dennis B. Neuenschwander in a Church meeting in St. Petersburg, Nov. 18, 1995.