

# Daniel S. Johnson

## - Catechist to Siberia & Baltic Churches

Garbė Dievui aukštybėse

ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται

Χριστὸς ἠορτάζει!

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The official language, Estonian, belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic languages. Estonian is closely related to Finnish, spoken on the other side of the Gulf of Finland, and is one of the few languages of Europe that is not of an Indo-European origin.

The historical land of Livonia has been split between Latvia and Estonia. The Livonian language is spoken by fewer than 100 individuals as a second language, and is understood to be fast approaching extinction. The last native Livonian speaker died in February 2009.

Estonia is one of the most secular countries in the world, with 75.7% of the population claiming to be irreligious. The Eurobarometer Poll in 2005 found that only 16% of Estonians profess a belief in a god, the lowest belief of all countries studied.

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### Lutheranism in Estonia - A brief history

Of the Baltic Lutherans in 1914, the Estonian Lutheran Church was the second largest with 1.1 million of them living in Livonia and Estonia. The Latvian Lutheran Church was the largest. (After WWI Livonia was divided between Latvia to the south and Estonia to the north). Livonia and Estonia came under Russian control after the Battle of Poltava in 1709, against Sweden.

It is interesting that the terms negotiated in the surrender of Swedish lands in Livonia and Estonia to Russia called for the continuing existence of a Lutheran identity. According to this arrangement, the tsars allowed Lutheran Churches to remain open and practice the faith, as Lutherans. However, all clergy were required to do so according to the doctrine, ceremonies and teachings of the Lutheran Confessions (as written in the Book of Concord of 1580).

The tsars wanted the Lutheran Church throughout the Russian Empire (this included the Baltic territories that had come under Russian control) to remain Lutheran in confession and practice - not because the tsars were particularly favorably disposed toward the Lutheran faith (even though many of the tsars and Russian nobility had married Lutherans), but rather, because of the need to prevent any fractioning and religious disunity, which could bring a disruption in Russian control of the territory.

The present territory of Estonia was once separated into two regions. The region around Tallinn (or Reval, its German name) was already called Estonia as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. After WWI, the region known as Livonia was divided between Latvia and Estonia. The northern territory of Livonia was assumed into Estonian territory and the southern part of Livonia came under the control of Latvia.

Although Christianity first arrived in the region known as Estonian in the latter 10<sup>th</sup> century, the formation of congregations did not begin until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century there were 94 parishes (or deaneries, each with its own congregations), and 15 monasteries. By 1524, only a few years after Luther's 95 Theses had been posted, the Lutheran Reformation arrived in Estonia. Due to the Reformation, the Estonian language began to be used in the liturgical and catechetical life of the church. The Bible was translated and printed in the Estonian language in 1739, along with the large and small catechisms and a hymnbook. **continued on next page**



Lutheran Cathedral in Tallinn





During the years 1939-1940 when the German Army occupied Estonia, many Estonians were repatriated back to Germany. With the Soviet occupation of 1941, the Soviet deportations of Estonians to Siberia began. Reports are written of families who were woken up in the early morning by pounding on their doors. A decree was shown to them by the authorities arresting them with the penalty of deportation. All property was confiscated and they were given one hour to pack. The people were packed into cattle cars and deported to Siberia and Central Asia. According to records, over 10,000 people were deported from June 14 to 17. Many stories are told about the particularly brutal treatment the Estonian people received at the hands of the Soviets. As many as 7,000 of those deported were women, children and old people, with 25 percent of those deported being minors under 16 years of age. Only the advancing German Army prevented further deportations to Siberia. By spring of 1942, of the approximately 3,000 men who had been exiled, only a few hundred remained alive – most of the men had been executed. The fate of the women and children was equally onerous. Because of the extreme cold, malnutrition and work conditions, many died. Less than half of the 1941 deportees ever returned to their homeland. By August 1941, the German Army had retaken Estonia and had driven the Soviets out. However, the freedom the Estonians expected from the German Army was not realized. The German Army was equally oppressive.

In 1944, with the German Army fighting a two-front war, Estonia was capitulated to the advancing Red Army. Immediately upon reoccupation, the Soviets began planning for more deportations of Estonians to Siberia and Central Asia. Many small deportations occurred from 1944-45. In March 1949, the preparations were ready for a large deportation. Over 20,000 people (3 percent of the Estonian population in 1945) were deported to Siberia. The order of the Communist Party was to “eliminate the Kulaks as a class.” [The Kulaks were land-owning peasants.] Deportation had become an official doctrine of the Soviet government. The majority of the 1949 deportees were women (10,274) and children (5,717). The youngest deportee recorded was nine months old. The oldest was 95 years old. Reports record two births aboard a train in route to Siberia. An archived file reveals that four minor children were sent to Siberia from Rakvere without being accompanied by their parents. The recorded purpose of the deportation was an attempt to entrap their parents into confessing subversive behavior against the Soviet occupation authorities. In 1944 many were forced to flee, as the approaching Red Army gave no promise of religious or political liberty. Approximately 80,000 Lutherans went into exile, including the archbishop and 70 pastors. Many fled into Sweden or to North America, Australia, Argentina, Germany or England.

Since WWII the Estonian culture has undergone dramatic political and social changes. With this change the Lutheran Church has not been left unaffected. In 1918 the Lutheran Church claimed 82 percent of the population. Due to the mass deportations, repatriation, and secularization the church today has merely 10-13 percent of the population. In a country of 1.3 million, the latest census records the number of baptized Lutherans at approximately 160,000.

Theological liberalism began to make headway in Estonia before WWII. After an oppressive Soviet presence for 50 years and an aggressive secular education system, Estonia is today the most secularized of the Baltic countries. With such a highly secularized populace and separation from other confessing Lutheran church bodies during the Soviet occupation, the Lutheran Church in Estonia adopted liberal and secular philosophies that teach doctrines and a practice inconsistent with the Lutheran Confessions. Such an environment has influenced the Lutheran Church in Estonia to adopt secular practices such as the ordination of women and higher-critical methods in interpreting Scripture. However, due to the influence of her Lutheran neighbors in Latvia, Lithuania, Russia (Ingria) and Siberia, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church is today becoming reacquainted with her Lutheran roots. ✠DSJ

### Prayer Requests, Praises, and Thanks

Please pray for the Lutherans in Estonia as they seek to regain a confessing Lutheran identity.

Pray for the faith and perseverance of the Estonian people as they are confronted with the dangers of an increasingly secular culture.



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