St. Petersburg has been called by Alexander Pushkin the “window to Europe” and it was Tsar Peter the Great (1672–1725) who opened it.¹ Driven by the desire to create a new Russia and to ensure a prominent place for it in the Western world, he set in motion a massive programme of modernisation in Russia. At the end of the seventeenth century he travelled to Europe on “The Great Embassy” to acquire the knowledge that he needed to carry this out and—forever fascinated by the sea—to make his empire into a sea power worthy to be reckoned with. His dream was to found a new city at the estuary of the Neva, and thus to ensure himself access to the waters of the Baltic, and, eventually, to hegemony in North-eastern Europe at last.² To do so he needed people with knowledge and craftsmanship, but these were not yet available in sufficient number in Russia at the time. During his visit in 1697 and 1698 he managed to recruit large numbers of skilled workmen. In the first decades of the eighteenth century not only shipwrights, building experts, and civil engineers, but also artists and academics from the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Denmark, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy travelled, for longer or shorter periods, to St.

Petersburg, a city to become one of the most eminent and beautiful in the whole of Europe. To attract all these foreigners, the tsar had to guarantee them the same rights as they enjoyed in their own country. Therefore, in 1702 he issued a decree that not only allowed foreigners free access to Russia, but also—and this was just as important at that time—the freedom to practice their own faith in their own manner.

The founding of the Dutch church

Among the first to travel to Russia with Tsar Peter was the Norwegian Dutchman, Cornelius Cruys (1657–1727). As a vice-admiral, he organised the Russian Black Sea Fleet for the tsar, and then went on to build the Baltic Fleet, after the resounding victory against the Swedes at Poltava in the Ukraine in 1709. The decree of 1702 cleared the way

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