

# The History of a Little-Known Monument by Estonian Sculptor Amandus Adamson

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**Abstract:** Monuments created by Estonian sculptor Amandus Adamson in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in St Petersburg, Tallinn, Sevastopol and other places are dominant features of popular architectural ensembles in these cities. Adamson's creative legacy – which includes a little-known large (more than two metre) sculpture of Peter I, the history of its creation and installation in 1916 and the statue's subsequent fate – is explored in this article. Over the past century, the sculpture has disappeared and then been installed in a new location three times as a result of social cataclysms that occurred during this time. Each time the architectural community of the Ukrainian city of Poltava (where the sculpture is located) saved Adamson's creatively successful work from destruction.

**Keywords:** sculptor and urban planner, style of the sculptor Adamson, Peter I by Adamson, saved sculpture, Adamson's work in Poltava

## Introduction

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were marked by a rise in national consciousness in the western regions of the Russian Empire, including, in particu-

lar, Estonia. One consequence of this was the emergence of a first-generation national intelligentsia. Among its most prominent representatives was the artistic intelligentsia including painters, graphic artists, and sculptors. Their artistic style typically developed under the influence of the Russian academic school – since most had studied at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St Petersburg – and the latest trends in Western European art, as many also studied in Paris or other European centres.

One of the most prominent figures among them was the sculptor Amandus Adamson (1856–1929), who is listed among the 100 Great Estonians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in today's Republic of Estonia. Adamson's sculptural works are held in museums in Estonia, Russia, and Western Europe. However, he achieved the greatest renown for his monumental sculptures, large-scale works the majority of which are preserved in St Petersburg, other Russian cities, and Estonia. His sculptures adorning building façades and his commemorative monuments have been described extensively, and photographs of them are featured in numerous albums, exhibition catalogues, and museum displays dedicated to Adamson. Yet among his oeuvre there is a major monumental work that remains relatively obscure and is rarely reproduced due to the complex history of its relocations, movements not always tracked by Estonian or Russian authors writing about Adamson. This work is a two-meter-tall sculpture of Peter I, the origins and subsequent movements of which constitute the subject of the present study.

## The Sculptor Adamson and His Artistic Signature

Amandus Adamson was born in 1855 at the Uuga-Rätsepa farmstead near the Baltic port (now town of) Paldiski, Estonia, the second child of a sailor and a peasant woman. In 1860, Adamson's father sailed to America and never returned. Amandus was placed in the Toompea school for children from impoverished families in Reval (now Tallinn), where he demonstrated an early aptitude for art by carving figures out of wood.

In 1875, he moved to St Petersburg and, in 1876, enrolled in the Imperial Academy of Arts, studying in the class of Professor Alexander von Bock. After graduating from the Academy in 1879, he remained in St Petersburg and taught at the School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts. With a grant from this society, he travelled to Paris, where he lived and worked until 1881.

In 1881, Adamson returned to St Petersburg as an instructor at the Stieglitz Art School. During this period, he participated in the reconstruction of Mikhailovsky Palace. It was also during this time that he created his well-known sculpture *The Ship's Last Sigh*, which marked the beginning of a recurring maritime theme in his work. Other notable compositions include *Fisherman from Muhu Island*, *Listening to the Voice of the Sea*, *Mermaid on a Rock*, *The Sea is Roaring*, *The Sea's Only Kiss*, and *The Birth of Venus*.

However, Adamson gained widespread fame as a monumental sculptor. He created large-scale sculptural forms and public monuments that are still a source of pride in the cities where they were erected during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Adamson's realised and unrealised monument projects are distinguished by their seamless integration of sculptural and architectural elements, forming cohesive artistic wholes. The first such monument, created in collaboration with architect Nikolai Thamm Jr., was the *Monument to the Sailors of the Battleship Rusalka*, unveiled in Reval (now Tallinn) on September 7, 1902. The monument is a complex artistic ensemble: the bronze figure of an angel in flight with outstretched wings and a cross in his right hand points toward the sea, mounted on a tall, massive pedestal of grey and pink granite that resembles the prow of a ship battling waves represented by chaotic clusters of granite boulders that form the monument's base. One side of the pedestal features a bronze bas-relief depicting a ship sinking in the waves; another bears the carved names of twelve fallen officers. The monument is surrounded by low granite posts connected by metal chains, with bronze plaques listing the names of the deceased sailors. The composition as a whole is situated on the seashore at the end of a tree-lined avenue that leads to a baroque palace built for Catherine I (wife of Peter the Great).

Equally significant in terms of urban design is the widely known ensemble centred around the *Monument to Sunken Ships* in Sevastopol Bay, commemorating ships scuttled during the Crimean War. Unveiled in 1905, this monument – created by Adamson in collaboration with architect Feldman and military engineer Enberg – features an artificial granite rock emerging from the sea, upon which stands a white diorite column topped with a Corinthian capital. Atop this, a bronze double-headed eagle spreads its wings. The eagle clutches a wreath in its beak and a naval anchor in its talons, a potent symbol. The monument's tragic counterpoint is emphasised by the contrast between

the randomly arranged granite boulders at the base and the austere form of the Corinthian column rising above the rippling sea. These two monuments, along with several white marble interior-scale sculptures, established Adamson as one of the foremost sculptors in Russia at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They led to commissions for façade sculptures on two prominent buildings on Nevsky Prospect in St Petersburg: the Eliseev Brothers Trading House and the Singer Company Building. Both were constructed around the same time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a bustling commercial area. Their architecture, rich in early Art Nouveau detailing, required sculptural elements that would neither be overwhelmed by nor visually compete with the elaborate façades. This challenge was compounded by the proximity of the buildings: the Eliseev building stood directly opposite the multi-figure monument to Catherine II, while the Singer Building faced the Kazan Cathedral with its majestic semi-circular colonnade and flanking sculptures. In both cases, Adamson found elegant solutions. The four massive sculptures on the Eliseev façade – Science, Commerce, Industry, and Art – were perfectly integrated with both the building's design and the surrounding Nevsky Prospect. Matching the size and style of the Catherine II monument opposite, these figures contributed to one of the grandest sculptural ensembles on the avenue.

In the case of the Singer Building, Adamson and architect Pavel Suzor devised an original solution, crowning the building's corner with a glass dome adorned with Adamson's allegorical sculptures, creating a visual response to both the Kazan Cathedral's dome and the vista along the Catherine Canal (now Griboyedov Canal).

By the early 1910s, Adamson was officially recognized alongside Antokolsky and Trubetskoy as one of Russia's leading sculptors. His monuments, along with decorative work on the Trinity Bridge in St Petersburg and friezes in two halls of the Russian Museum, earned him the title of Academician of the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1907. His nomination was supported by the landscape painter Arkhip Kuindzhi, sculptor Alexander Opekushin, and architect Vladimir Suslov. In 1911, he won a Academy competition to design a monument commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty in Kostroma (the project was never realised).

Given Adamson's body of monumental work, it is understandable why, without holding a competition, he was approached in 1914 to create a statue of Peter I for the Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps. Both the commissioners and the

sculptor were acutely aware of the monument's context in a city already rich with memorials to Peter the Great. Directly in front of the Cadet Corps building stood the imposing Monument of Glory, created by Thomas de Thomon for the centennial of the Battle of Poltava, in the centre of the Round Square. All the buildings surrounding the square including the Cadet Corps itself were constructed as a commemorative ensemble for the centenary of the battle in 1809. Designed by leading Russian architects, the ensemble earned Poltava the nickname Little St Petersburg. Figure 1 shows the façade of the Cadet Corps building, designed by architect Bonch-Bruyevich in the late Classicist style, harmonising with the other buildings around the Round Square (the Cadet Corps, completed in 1840, completed the architectural ensemble).

Adamson's decision to create a statue of Peter I without any architectural enhancements to the monument's presence is thus understandable: he sought not to compete with the monumental composition by Thomas de Thomon, which was placed at the visual intersection of all buildings on the circular square (Monument of Glory, see Figure 2).

The bronze figure of Peter was 204 cm tall, the exact height of the emperor. He is depicted wearing the uniform of a colonel of the Preobrazhensky Regiment. The sculpture, overall, is a harmonious composition in the late Classicist style (Figure 3). It was cast under the sculptor's supervision at the Petrograd foundry of K. F. Werfel in dark patinated bronze. The pedestal was made from a monolith of Finnish granite, quarried and finished by the Granit Joint Stock Company in the town of Hanko, according to designs by military engineer Lieutenant General Nikolai Konovalov, a graduate of the Poltava Cadet Corps (class of 1861). The above information is drawn from Alexander Romashkevich's article "A Gift to the Corps on Its 75th Anniversary, December 6, 1915" (Romashkevich 1915: 215).



Figure 1. Building of the Poltava Petrovsky Cadet Corps. (Image source: [https://ua.igotoworld.com/ru/poi\\_object/52381\\_petrovskiy-poltavskiy-kadetskiy-korpus.htm](https://ua.igotoworld.com/ru/poi_object/52381_petrovskiy-poltavskiy-kadetskiy-korpus.htm))



Figure 2. Monument of Glory in Poltava. (Image source: <http://histpol.pl.ua/ru/component/content/article?id=842>)

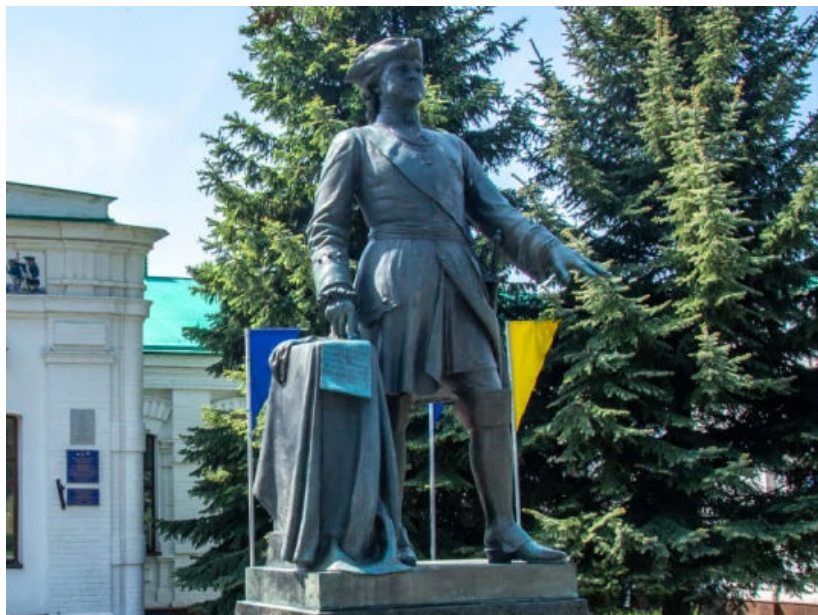


Figure 3. Sculpture of Peter I by Amandus Adamson. (Image source: <https://ru.espresso.tv/mestnye-vlasti-poltavy-blokiruyut-snos-pamyatnika-petru-i>)

## The History of the Monument

The monument to Peter I was a gift to the cadet corps from its alumni, who collected funds for this purpose through a subscription. As stated in the aforementioned article by Romashkevich:

The idea of presenting a gift arose as early as 1913 within the walls of the corps itself and was enthusiastically received by its alumni. At meetings of the Poltava cadets, it was decided to present a full-length bronze statue of Emperor Peter I. A managing committee was elected, which included General of the Infantry Bazhenov (Class of 1859), General of the Cavalry Stavrovsky (1863), Lieutenant General Pototsky (1863), Privy Councillor Kovalevsky (1865), Lieutenant General Konovalov (1867), Lieutenant Colonel Saranchov (1872), Lieutenant General Pototsky (1874), Lieutenant General Moralevsky (1875), Major General Popov (1875),



Colonel Bykov (1877), Colonel Romashkevich (1881), and Colonel Komendantov (1882). The committee immediately began informing former pupils of the corps and gymnasium – via newspapers and letters sent to known addresses – about the subscription and the commission of the statue.... On the front of the pedestal was placed a bronze plaque with the inscription “To our alma mater from grateful alumni, on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the corps, December 6, 1915.” The other sides bore bronze plaques with the names of all donors, including given name, patronymic, surname, and year of graduation. Due to wartime circumstances, the statue could not be delivered to Poltava by December 6, 1915, and only arrived on February 29, 1916. The unveiling, consecration, and presentation to the corps took place on March 20. (Romashkevich 1915: 215)

Romashkevich is also the author of the article “On the Unveiling of the Statue of Emperor Peter the Great at the Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps”, published in the *Poltava Herald* on March 22, 1916, which states: “On March 20 this year, the Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps installed and consecrated a monument statue of the great reformer of Russia, Emperor Peter I, presented to the corps by its former pupils in honor of its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.”

Despite a fairly large number of testimonies regarding the monument itself, discrepancies exist concerning its exact location. Some publications state that it was installed at the courtyard entrance of the corps building (Korsunsky 2012), while others claim it stood in the main vestibule at the street-facing entrance. The situation remains unclear. A detailed historical report (Korsunsky 2012) asserts that the statue was installed in the courtyard (at the edge of the parade ground) in front of the building’s rear façade. A photograph from the 1950s shows a pedestal bearing the bust of General Vatutin, a hero of the 1941–1945 Great Patriotic War who commanded the liberation of Poltava in 1944. The article claims that the bust of Peter I previously stood on that very pedestal.

This scenario is plausible. However, the relatively informal placement of the monument, intended seemingly for “internal use only”, raises questions. The Cadet Corps was not strictly a military academy but more akin to a gymnasium: a preparatory institution for those intending to pursue further education in specialised military schools. Graduates were not necessarily destined for military careers. Therefore, the parade ground played a less central role in the education process than it did in fully military academies.



It seems more logical that the statue was located in the main entrance foyer, situated directly behind the formal entrance to the building. Admittedly, the height of the foyer raises some concerns. While the space could accommodate the two-metre statue and its pedestal – with the commemorative plaques mentioned by Romashkevich – it would have occupied the full vertical space of the foyer. Installing a granite monolith and the statue inside would have posed significant logistical challenges. Difficult, but not impossible.

To clarify the statue's original location, I sought assistance from Boris Tristanov, historian and founder of the website History of Poltava, and Save-Poltava, a non-profit organisation. In his reply, Tristanov wrote:

I consulted once again with Poltava architects, as well as with the Poltava Regional Museum and archive. All confirmed that the statue of Peter I stood in the foyer of the PPC [Poltava Petrine Cadet Corps]. Vladimir Moklyak, of the PRM [Poltava Regional Museum], stated that a bust of Peter once stood in the courtyard. I am aware of only one bust, donated by the Poltava nobility to the corps in 1890, but whether this is the same bust remains unknown.

It is also worth noting that the bust of Vatutin clearly did not stand on the pedestal of the Peter I statue, as the latter was granite, while the former was made of concrete, as seen in photographs from the 1950s.

## The Monument Saved Twice

The exact date when the Cadet Corps lost the statue of Peter I is unknown. Officially, the corps was closed by decree of the Council of People's Commissars on February 12, 1919. However, instruction at the school had effectively ceased by the end of 1917. Between 1917 and 1919, control over Poltava changed hands multiple times. Various factions, for example the Reds, the Whites, and others, occupied the corps building during this period. The fate of the statue during these years remains uncertain. There is evidence that in 1920 a bust of Vladimir Lenin was installed in the building, possibly on Peter's pedestal. It is also known that from 1920 onward, the statue of Peter I was housed in the Poltava Regional Museum. Where it was between 1918 and 1919 remains

unclear. Fortunately, the Poltava authorities had the discretion not to send the statue for scrap.

Upon receiving the sculpture, the Museum's management, due to its large size, decided not to house it indoors but instead installed it in the Museum courtyard on a low brick-and-mortar pedestal, almost level with the ground. Local youths enjoyed standing beside it to compare their height with that of the emperor. The sculpture remained in this location until 1941.

After Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, anticipating the front line's advance into eastern Ukraine, local authorities began evacuating cultural assets, including museum collections, as early as August 1941. The statue of Peter I was laid on the ground and packed in some fashion, but was not taken, probably due to its size. In late August or early September – exact details are unknown – a museum staff member (perhaps a janitor) pushed, or helped push, the two-metre bronze statue into a shallow drainage ditch along the fence line. This ditch had been constructed to prevent soil erosion from the museum courtyard, which sat on a slope above a ravine. The sculpture fit into the ditch and was covered with branches from nearby shrubs and, later, fallen autumn leaves. The strategy worked: no one ventured onto the overgrown slope beyond the museum fence, and no one searched for the statue, apparently assuming it had been evacuated with other artifacts.

In September 1944, the museum building was destroyed by fire. The statue was rediscovered in the spring of 1945, after Poltava was liberated from occupation, and was once again placed on its preserved low pedestal.

## The Third Reincarnation of the Monument

The further fate of the bronze statue of Peter is described in the memoirs of Lev Vaingort, long-term Chief Architect of Poltava, in his book *Notes of a Provincial Architect*. Below is the chapter recounting the installation of the sculpture of Peter I in front of the Poltava Battle Museum, presented in full. The chapter is titled “Should We Erect a Monument to the Tsar?”:

This unexpected problem arose in the autumn of 1950, just as we were preparing to complete the installation of a monument to Peter I in front of the newly established State Museum of the History of the Battle of Poltava.

The granite pedestal, produced in the Kyiv workshops of 'Stroymonument' and designed by architect D. S. Verotsky, was already in place, and the sculpture lay beside it. Suddenly, I was summoned to the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Poltava Regional Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine. There, one of the instructors (whose name I do not recall) subjected me to what was essentially an interrogation: "Comrade Vaingort, what is this I hear about you erecting a monument to the Tsar?" He ordered all work to be halted. My explanations that the project had been approved by all the relevant authorities, including the Ministry of Culture and the State Construction Committee of Ukraine, and that the museum opening was only two days away, making it impossible to leave a bare pedestal in front, were dismissed.

The Propaganda Department has submitted a request to the Ukrainian Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks). Until we receive authorisation to install the statue of Peter, we have no right to proceed, and we will not.

Dismayed by this turn of events, I managed to get an audience with Mark Sidorovich Spivak, the First Secretary of the Regional Committee, who had asked me just the day before about progress on the museum and monument. After hearing me out, the 'First' immediately asked his secretary to call the Central Committee's Propaganda Department. Then, thinking better of it, he cancelled the call and told me: "Since the Central Committee has not issued any directives regarding the monument, you should act in anticipation. Organise the work tonight and make sure that by morning, Peter is standing on the pedestal. And do your best to come down with something for a couple of days. Understood?" he concluded meaningfully.

I had reached him late in the day. Everyone had already left the construction site. But Mark Sidorovich arranged for two vehicles to be placed at my disposal, and I got to work.

I sent one vehicle for supplies and refreshments for the workers. In the other, I went to rouse the teams needed to install the sculpture overnight – specifically, stonemasons and riggers.

I told the crew that an important delegation would be arriving in the morning and that we had to finish the monument overnight. They grumbled, but agreed to the emergency job. With a promised bonus and *mogarych* (traditional refreshments; a kind of informal treat or feast offered as a token of gratitude or as an incentive), they committed to working at full speed to complete everything by morning.

By midnight, accompanied by the chant “Heave, once more, heave!”, the two-metre-tall figure had been hoisted onto the pedestal. By 7 am, the work was complete.

The crew sat down to celebrate, and I went home, warned my wife, and headed off to be ‘ill’ at my mother’s house (she lived on Karl Liebknecht Street).

I did not attend the museum opening and avoided showing up at the regional committee for the next month.

The newspapers reported on the museum’s opening, but made no mention of the monument.

A month later, the Secretary of the Central Committee for Ideology, Nazarenko, arrived in Poltava. As usual, I was part of the entourage accompanying him around the city. When the motorcade headed toward the Poltava Battlefield, my heart sank: what would happen when we reached the monument?

As we approached, Mark Sidorovich Spivak ordered the cars to stop about 200 metres from the museum and suggested we first examine the mass grave of Russian soldiers and the improvements made to the surrounding area, before proceeding to the museum.

The guest was pleased with everything. When we reached the museum, Nazarenko exclaimed: “How wonderful that Peter the First is here!” Everyone entered the museum, while our ‘First’ held back, waited for me, shook my hand, and gave me a conspiratorial wink, nodding toward the monument.

When we parted, he came up to me once more and said: “Well, Comrade Chief Architect, you see – we prevailed!” (Vaingort 2001).

In 2024, a debate arose in Poltava regarding the future of the monument to Peter I in front of the Poltava Battle Museum (Figure 4). Several groups initiated a campaign to dismantle the monument as a symbolic protest against the aggression of the Russian Federation, which launched a full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. On February 24, 2025, the sculpture of Peter I was removed from its pedestal and relocated to the museum courtyard. Responding to an enquiry from local historians, the Director of the Poltava City Department of Culture, Elena Romas, stated: “The sculpture, which is part of the core collection of the Field of the Battle of Poltava State Historical and Cultural Reserve, will remain there. Its relocation or destruction is not planned.”



Figure 4. Monument to Peter I in Poltava, in front of the Museum of the Battle of Poltava. (Image source: <http://monuments.top/pamyatnik-petru-v-poltave>)

In this instance, the preservation of architectural heritage was ensured thanks to the museum's accounting records. Thus, Adamson's sculpture finds itself once again in the museum courtyard, and hopefully its adventures are not yet over.

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