

Finland 1809 and the Art of Making a Legitimate Diet

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The wars that tormented Europe from 1792 until the Congress of Vienna 1814–1815 consisted of many diverging and changing interests and conflicts. The war between Russia and Sweden 1808–1809 was one of these many political and military conflicts that changed the political map of Europe during the years around the turn of century 1800. The continent was also filled by victory parades and other ceremonial events. In this paper I am going to concentrate on a detail in this European history of war and ceremony, the Diet of Borgå (Porvoo) that emperor Alexander I summoned in 1809 during the war against Sweden, which continued until September 1809.¹

The Russian troops transgressed the boarder to the Swedish realm at Abborfors (Ahvenkoski) in February 21st 1808. Three days later they were in Borgå (Porvoo), about 50 kilometres to the east of today's capital Helsingfors (Helsinki). The Swedish army withdrew to the north, in May the fortress Sveaborg outside Helsingfors surrendered. The 17th of July 1808 emperor Alexander I declared to the world that he had conquered Finland and united it with his empire for all times. The Finnish part of the Swedish realm was never reconquered by Sweden and became a part of the Russian empire as the Grand-Duchy of Finland (storfurstendöme). The Russian emperor and tsar became the grand-duke and emperor of Finland for the following hundred years up until 1917. The Swedish loss of eleven Finnish provinces was established in the peace treaty of Fredrikshamn (Hamina) between Sweden and Russia in September 1809. The union between the emperor Alexander I and his new Finnish subjects was established formally already earlier, in the Diet of Borgå (Porvoo) 1809 through ritual and political practice, both on an emotional level and a practical level. Later the formal, judicial level and significance was stressed, but that was in a high degree a construction of later times.

The episcopal town of Borgå was the scene of a Diet in spring and summer of 1809, from the 25th of March to the 19th of July. The Diet of Borgå was organized in Petersburg but in accordance with Swedish laws and traditions (that were the domestic "Finnish" laws and traditions as well). The Diet was a meeting of the four political estates: the nobility, the clergy, the burghers and the peasants. Emperor Alexander I and his advisor Mikhail Speransky engaged a small circle of Finnish government officials and noblemen to plan and carry through a meeting of the estates according to Swedish law and political practice. It was a Swedish miniature Diet, a *riksdag*, for the Finnish regions of the Swedish realm, for subjects that still at this time saw themselves as subjects of the Swedish King Gustav IV Adolf. It was called a *lantdag* as it was not a meeting organized for the estates of a realm (*rike*) but for a part of a realm.

¹ The paper is based on a book I wrote for the 200 years anniversary of the Diet of Borgå: *Borgå 1809. Ceremoni och fest*, Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 718, Helsingfors 2009. The book was translated to Finnish by Professor Jussi T. Lappalainen: *Porvoo 1809. Juhlamenteija ja tanssiaisia* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura 2009).

Arranging a Swedish Diet in the region that was occupied, Alexander I could show that he intended to keep his promise that Swedish customs and practices, and the Lutheran faith were to prevail also under Russian rule. The Diet also gave the emperor occasions to appear in front of and talk to the Finnish subjects in different roles and settings, a political practice that Alexander I successfully used in Finland also in 1819, and tried to use in Poland that same year but with less success.

The former governor (*landshövding*) and owner of many country estates in Finland and Sweden Baron Robert Wilhelm De Geer was appointed speaker of the noble estate (*lantmarskalk*) and the deputy judge of the court of appeal of Åbo (Turku), Baron Robert Wilhelm Rehbinder was appointed to be his assistant and the adjoint of Mikhail Speransky. Rehbinder's main task as adjoint was to organize the Diet together with Baron De Geer under the supervision of Speransky and Alexander I personally, and they both stayed in St. Petersburg during the autumn and winter of 1808 and 1809. Baron Berndt Otto Stackelberg was made governor (*ståthållare*) of Borgå for the time of the Diet, and was responsible for the practical arrangements in Borgå and its vicinity. A very important key figure was also the Bishop of Åbo, Jacob Tengström, who was called to Petersburg and appointed the speaker (*talman*) of the clergy.

The program was organized following the same ceremonial and order that directed the Swedish diets. Also Swedish Diets had sometimes been organized outside the capital Stockholm, in other towns. In 1809 in Finland the chosen town was Borgå, an episcopal town where one could find the needed buildings and rooms for the occasion. Suitably enough the town also lay much nearer to St. Petersburg than for instance Åbo (Turku), which was a larger town with both a bishop and chapter and a university, as well as a court of appeal and governor's office.

The material arrangements and preparations were as carefully realized as the judicial and political. The cathedral and the school (*Borgå gymnasium*) were two central scenes. A throne and a canopy were imported from Russia, a new marshal's baton (blue with golden crowns, a Swedish baton) was made for the *lantmarskalk*. Blue cloth and velvet with golden crowns were ordered to decorate the meeting room of the nobility, green cloth was used to decorate the Hall of State in the school, green being a Russian colour, a symbol of the imperial setting, blue marking a Swedish "zone". Also the two heralds were in De Geer's plans given uniforms in blue with golden details but the colours were changed into the colours of the highest Russian order, the Order of Saint Andrew, blue and silver.

The coat of arms of Finland was embroidered on the cloth that hang behind the imperial throne but the symbols and colours were mainly Russian (imperial red and green) and Swedish (blue, gold). In 1809 the responsible officials were not creating a Finnish Diet, they could not yet see the future Finnish Grand Duchy, they did not know that the Diet would become an important symbol for the autonomous Grand-Duchy as a political and geographical entity of its own.

The Diet started with a ceremonial program:

25th of March 1809: "utblåsning", announcement of the Diet in Borgå. The members of the estates were asked to report themselves to their estates, the Diet was announced to start three days later. The *lantmarskalk* Baron R.W. De Geer did his entrance into Borgå and was received by his estate. De

Geer came in an imperial carriage harnessed by six brown horses. The commoner estates assembled for the first time this same day. The emperor had designated the speakers to all estates.

27th of March 1809: the emperor arrived in Borgå. When Alexander I got out of the carriage by the Nybom house he greeted the mistress of the house with a “god dag vackert”, “good day beautiful”. Many stories were told about the emperor being graceful and kind to common people in Borgå and other places that he passed during his journey in southern Finland.

28th of March 1809: opening ceremony and inauguration of the Diet that consisted of divine service in the cathedral of Borgå and an opening session *plenum plenorum* in the school (gymnasium) of Borgå where the large class room was decorated as a Hall of State. The estates, the emperor and his suite walked in procession to the cathedral and from the cathedral to the school. In the cathedral, as in the procession, everybody had their designated place according to function and rank. In the cathedral and in the Hall of State the emperor stood on a podium in front of his throne, under a canopy. The gallery in the cathedral was filled by women that were not allowed into the Hall of State in the school, or into the estate meetings.

In the cathedral Dean Magnus Jacob Alopæus gave the sermon in Swedish – Alexander I had received a French translation earlier, and the sermon was checked by bishop Tengström. It was a “hopelessly long and wordy sermon” the Russian courtier Prince Gagarin later wrote in a book called *Les treize journées ou la Finlande* (1809). Alopæus brought up typical Swedish political topics and concepts from the Gustavian age, talking about *medborgare* (citizen) and *lagenlig frihet* (legal liberty), and stressing the importance of everybody working for the common good and concordance. These were concepts and topics that worked well also in the new political context and suited the new ruler.

In the Hall of State the emperor spoke to his Finnish subjects, represented by the estates. The speech was in French. A translation was read in Swedish by the governor-general Göran Magnus Sprengtporten. Finnish was only spoken in informal gatherings; it was not yet a language of politics or formal events. It was the language of some of the peasants and burghers. The Chancellor of Justice Adolf Tandefelt then read Alexander’s propositions in Swedish, the questions that the emperor wanted the estates to discuss. The estates were according to the prevailing Swedish law not making any decisions, they only gave recommendations.

The same evening the Hall of State was transformed into a ballroom. The ladies that during the day only could participate and follow the spectacle from the gallery in church were in the evening given a more central role and the emperor danced with the wives of the prominent officials and nobles present.

29th of March 1809: the most important ceremony from the emperor’s point of view was the *hyllningsakt*, a ceremony where the estates paid their tribute and swore an oath to the emperor and the emperor gave an assurance to the Finnish estates. What this assurance was and signified, and could signify later in the 19th century and until 1917, has been a combustible political and scholarly question in the 19th and 20th century, and on a more popular level still today. Nowadays most scholars agree with professors Matti Klinge, Max Engman and Osmo Jussila that Alexander’s speech was purposely imprecise and was not intended to give the Russian Finland any far reaching liberties. It was only later, through administrative and fiscal practice, that an autonomous political and

administrative Finnish state was created. As Nils Erik Villstrand has pointed out the *hyllningsakt* was purposely organized in the same way that Swedish kings gave their assurance, *konungaförsäkran*, to the estates and the estates swore an oath to the king. Only nine years earlier the Swedish estates (including members from the Finnish part of the realm) had sworn an oath of allegiance to Gustav IV Adolf in the Diet of Norrköping. Some of the men that participated in the Diet of Borgå had also been present in Norrköping in 1800.

Villstrand's point is that Alexander I badly needed the estates to swear an oath of allegiance because the Russians had not managed to have all government officials in Finland and other Finnish men that were of age swear an oath to the emperor in 1808 or 1809, even though they had tried. The estates representing all Finnish subjects could do it instead, and the *hyllningsakt* with its oath was conveniently a part of the Swedish political practice.

More was of course needed to make the new Finland a loyal and peaceful part of the Russian empire. The emperor's active presence in Finland in 1809 was an important factor. After the ceremonies in Borgå Alexander I continued to Helsingfors (Helsinki) and the sea fortress Sveaborg and further to Åbo (Turku) where he visited the University and the Court of Appeal. Then he returned to St. Petersburg and concentrated on the war on the continent. In July Alexander I returned to Borgå for the ending of the Diet, decorating the key participants with imperial orders and endowing noble titles. A ball was also part of these festivities.