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Between Russia, Sweden, and Finland: The Åland Question Since 1809

Abstract

This contribution addresses the strategical, political, and cultural significance of the Åland Islands between Russia, Sweden, and Finland from 1809 to the present day. During the first half of the 19th century, Russia fulfilled, with the conquest of the Åland Islands, one of its military goals which had been in place since the Petrine period, namely, to push forward the country's military control as far as to the Western border of Finland in order to secure Russia's capital St. Petersburg, and to threaten the capital of the kingdom of Sweden, Stockholm, in order to prevent a Swedish act of revenge for the loss of Sweden's control of the Eastern Baltic during the Great Northern War. At the same time, the islands were, in a political and cultural sense, an important ingredient of the upcoming Swedish and Finnish national movements. After the loss of Finland, the countries had tried to find solace in national culture and past glories. In this respect, the question of why Sweden, during the Finnish Civil War, sent troops to the Åland Islands can be interpreted as part of Sweden's anti-Russian military agenda as well as being part of its cultural mission to protect the islands against Finnish and Russian attempts to make the island part of Finnish or Russian culture, and to subdue the overwhelmingly-Swedish-speaking population in the context of a Finnish national state. This Swedish-Finnish opposition, though, turned, during the interwar period, into a secret collaboration against Russian military interests in the Eastern Baltic region, whereby the control of the Åland Islands played a central role. Despite minor yet critical situations, the islands have enjoyed relative calm ever since. However, the outbreak of Russia's Ukrainian War threatens to cast doubt once again on the islands' status.

Keywords: Åland Islands, International Conventions, Sweden, Russia, Finland

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The history of the Åland Islands seemed at first and for centuries to be a history of a remote archipelago somewhere up in the North bearing no significance. Later on, and for more than two hundred years now, the Åland Islands have become a much-disputed-and-finally-internationally-renowned success model for demilitarisation and neutrality politics. Against this background, the following paper will concentrate on the strategic, political, and cultural significance of the Åland Islands, located between Russia, Sweden, and Finland from 1809 to the present day. It starts from the assumption that the inclusion of the Åland Islands into the Russian Empire's geostrategic concept in the Northwest dated back to the military constellations of the Great Northern War (1700–1721) and mainly aimed at preventing a suspected Swedish act of revenge against Russia and, namely, St. Petersburg, whose naval base in turn represented a massive threat to Swedish security interests. At the same time, the islands were, in a political and cultural sense, an important ingredient of the upcoming Swedish and Finnish national movements, which, after the loss of Finland in 1809, betook themselves to take refuge in their cultural pride and the importance of language for the identity of the people. They also strongly propagated, as an enemy image, the theory of a "Russian threat", which had to be resolutely countered (Kuldknepp, 2014). Thus, one question to be answered is, why did Sweden, although officially a neutral country, send troops to the Åland Islands during the Finnish Civil War? Was it for strategic, political, or cultural reasons? The same question applies to Finland, which had, in 1918, only just gained independence from Russia. A third question is, what strategic, political, and cultural significance did the Åland Islands have after World War I, and how did they thrive after being placed, by international law, under the control of the Republic of Finland in 1921?

Due to the long period dealt with, research literature forms the basis of the subsequent account. Original sources have only been used when key events and official acts had to be verified and particularised. This combined approach will hopefully lead to a multi-faceted and, at the same time, a not-overly-detailed, small-meshed perspective on what might be called a litmus test history of an international reconciliation of interest.

A Place of Baltic Power Politics: The Åland Islands Before World War I

For centuries, the Åland Islands formed the central part of the kingdom of Sweden. There was no question as regards whether or not they belonged to Sweden or Finland, because there was no Finland in a political sense

nor as a distinct legal or political territory before 1809. What was called the Grand Duchy of Finland after 1809 and is now known as the Republic of Finland, in former times was nothing but the eastern part of the kingdom of Sweden. At most, the Grand Duchy of Finland under the governance of Duke John (who ruled as duke between 1568–1592) brother and vassal of king Erik XIV (ruling between 1560-1568), which formed a part of the kingdom of Sweden during the second half of the 16th century, pointed to some kind of political distinctiveness. But in these times, Finland had not, as in the 19th century, a separate diet, separate estates and laws, or any separate institutions to rule the country – except for the duke who ruled over domestic affairs with absolute power, but depended in matters concerning Sweden in its entirety completely on the realm’s central ruler, namely, the king of Sweden. It was the same army and navy that defended, and the same diplomats who represented, the Duchy of Finland like any other region of the empire. Finland thus was a mere geographical and linguistic notion for a part of the Swedish conglomerate state, which did not even carry any particular status of distinctiveness such as, for example, Sweden’s Baltic, German, or Lapponian provinces. What’s more, the very *notion* of Finland – for centuries – only referred to a small piece of the later Grand Duchy, namely the region surrounding the city of Åbo (in Finnish, *Turku*), which, in more recent times, has gone under the notion of so-called “Finland proper” (in Swedish, *Egentliga Finland*, and in Finnish, *Varsinais-Suomi*) (Huovinen, 1986).

This situation changed with the Swedish-Russian war of 1808–1809 and the peace treaty of Fredrikshamn (in Finnish, *Hamina*) in September 1809. The ceded lands of Sweden’s Eastern parts turned into a northwestern part of the Russian Empire. Officially, the new territory went under the name of a Grand Duchy of Finland, attached to St. Petersburg by personal union, with the Russian Tsar ruling in Finland as a Grand Duke. The Grand Duke, though, did not reside in Finland. Instead, a Russian governor was appointed to execute the Grand Duke’s power (Klinge, 1997, pp. 32, 198; Virrankoski, 2001, p. 414; Nesemann, 2003).

According to Tsar-Grand Duke Alexander I’s promise on the 1809 Diet of Borgå (in Finnish, *Porvoo*), the Russian Tsar, used to autocratic rule in Russia proper, could rule in the Grand Duchy only with the consent of the Finnish estates, represented in the Finnish Diet. Furthermore, having assured the Finnish estates of the maintaining of the Swedish constitutions and fundamental laws (in Swedish, *regeringsform*, and, more precisely, the *regeringsform* of 1772 and the constitution on unification and security of 1789), the Tsar inherited the political role of the former Swedish king. This meant that he, as supreme commander of the imperial

army and navy, had to decide on matters of foreign policy and especially on questions of war and peace (Backman, 2006, pp. 19–20; Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 1772, p. 15; Tommila, 2008; Hakala, 2009).

For Russia, Finland was primarily of strategic and symbolic interest. This applied especially to the Åland Islands, which were part of the newly-shaped territory. During the negotiations before the Fredrikshamn treaty, Sweden had clearly insisted on the islands, which were geographically closer to mainland Sweden than to Finland, being handed over to the kingdom of Sweden and also insisted on a provision in the peace treaty forbidding the islands to be fortified by Russia. But Russia resolutely refused. The same applied to the British concepts of a “balance of power” and “open seas”, which was to say, in the case of the Baltic Sea region, that Russia’s attempt to dominate the Baltic had to be contained by any means (Nesemann, 2003; Tommila, 2008; Hakala, 2009).

The acquisition of the Åland Islands indeed enabled Russia’s government to pursue one of its central political objectives since the times of Peter the Great, i.e., to usurp Sweden’s naval supremacy over the Baltic (*dominium maris Baltici*), a goal which had partly been impeded by the British and Dutch at the end of the Great Northern War. Thus, Russia repeated a policy already known from the first half of the 18th century, when, in 1719, the Russian army used the Åland Islands as a base for raids on mainland Sweden (Lind, 2019; Ullman, 2006), and when, during the so-called “Little War” (in Swedish, *Lilla ofreden*, and in Finnish, *Pikkuviha* 1741–1743), the Åland Islands formed the westernmost outpost of Russia’s military presence in the Baltic Sea region. After 1809, the geostrategic position of the Åland Islands once again proved to be crucial in order to block Swedish, British, or any other naval forces from entering the Gulf of Finland by controlling the entrance to the Gulf from the Åland Islands on the one hand, and by Russian navy stations in Riga and Reval (in Estonian Tallinn) on the other¹ (Åselius, 2018, p. 469; Grainger, 2014). At the same time, blocking the Gulf of Finland would secure the main body of the Russian navy stationed in Kronstadt (St. Petersburg) as well as the capital of the Russian Empire itself. What’s more, fortifying the Åland Islands signified a deterrence to Sweden, which the Russian government expected would incite a war of revenge in order to regain Finland and the Baltic provinces – as already demonstrated in the Swedish-Russian wars of 1741–1743 and 1788–1790 (LeDonne, 1994).

As a consequence, Russia started, in 1830, to fortify the Åland Islands by building the great fortress of Bomarsund (Robbins, 2004, pp. 55–76;

¹ The Royal British Navy had, after all, intervened 20 times in the Baltic Sea area before 1814.

Robins, Skogsjo, Orjans, 2006). But this undertaking, designed to house around 5000 men and 500 canons, came to an abrupt end as a result of a number of British and French campaigns in Baltic waters during the Crimean War (1853–1856), known in Finland as the Åland War (in Finnish, *Oolanin sota*, and in Swedish, *Åländska kriget*, 1854–1856). Clearly, their aim was to interrupt Russia's communications and foreign trade via the Baltic Sea and to block the Russian navy in Kronstadt. An initial campaign in April 1854 failed to be successful. However, in August of the same year, a combined British and French fleet under the command of Charles-Eugène Pénaud (1800–1864) managed to advance to the entries of the Gulfs of Finland and Botnia with the Åland Islands at the centre of attention. The British and French besieged the unfinished fortress of Bomarsund and blew it up in early September, because there seemingly was no chance of holding the fortress during the winter of 1854/1855. More raids and bombings followed along the Botnian coastline and in the Gulf of Finland until 1855. The siege of Sveaborg (in Finnish, *Suomenlinna*) and St. Petersburg again was a failure. But the British and French had at least achieved their main goal, namely, to blockade Russia's oversea trade in the Baltic (Colvile, 1941, pp. 541, 72–80; Lambert, 1983; 2011; Greenhill, Giffard, 1988; Suhonen, 2011; Johnson, Malmberg, 2013; Rath, 2015).

After Russia's surrender on January 16th, 1856, and the ratification of the Paris Peace Treaty (*Traité de paix*, 1856), negotiated between the Ottoman Empire and its allies Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Sardinia on the one hand and Russia on the other, a special convention obligated Russia to demilitarise the entire Åland archipelago (*Traité de paix*, 1856, pp. 31–33). For decades to come, Russia would then be in no position to neglect the provisions of the Treaty of Paris. Indeed, for more than a half century, the islands remained, in terms of navy policies and geostrategy, a remote spot on the Western outskirts of the Russian Empire. The Ålanders were free to return to a relatively calm and quiet life, concentrating on activities such as fishing, sailing, trade, and handicraft (Kåhre, 2018; Vostrov, 2018; Kuvaja, Hårdstedt, Hakala, 2008; Rotkirch, 1986, pp. 357–376, 359–361).

Only when war broke out in 1914 did a fundamentally reformed and militarily restored Tsarist Empire turn the islands, against the provisions of the Åland convention of 1856, into a navy base for British and Russian submarine vessels (Sauramo, 1937, pp. 198–202). As a consequence, the islands became a hot military target again. As an example, on 25th July, 1916, the German airship SL9 attacked the port of Mariehamn and bombed the boats of the Russian 5th submarine squadron (Gustavsson, 2004, pp. 68–70,

76–80). In order to prevent a large-scale German invasion, Russia started to build, with the consent of its allies France and Great Britain, but again in contravention of the Paris Peace Treaty, a number of docks and airfields on the islands. This, in turn, fuelled suspicions in Sweden that Russia was about to rearm the islands in order to attack Sweden and to threaten the country's neutrality. Sweden, therefore, insisted on guarantees that the fortifications be demolished after the war. But these demands were, from Russia's side, not granted by written documents. Promises coming by way of word of mouth formulated by allied diplomats were the best Sweden could achieve. It is documented, though, that Russia intended to keep the fortifications after the war in order to turn the islands into an impregnable fortress (Sauramo, 1937; Dreijer, 1972, pp. 17–18; Jonas, 2019, pp. 111–112; Isaksson, 1983; Rotkirch, 1986, pp. 362–364).

Finnish Independence, Civil War and the Turn to Ethnic Arguments

In March 1917, Russian mariners and soldiers organised, as a consequence of the “February Revolution” in Russia, demonstrations in the streets of Mariehamn, which led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II (who ruled between 1894–1917) on March 18th, 1917. With law and order shattered on the islands, a small group of Åland activists thereupon formed under the leadership of Mariehamns vice district chief (in Swedish *vicehäradshövding*) Carl Björkman (1873–1948). It was largely composed of Åland members of Swedish and German intelligence services engaged as foreign agents on the islands committing acts of sabotage against Russian military facilities. From March to April 1917, they met several times in order to establish contact with, *inter alia*, Swedish politicians. In May 1917, the activist group succeeded to get in touch with the Swedish historian and right-wing liberal Nils Edén (1871–1945), who was anxious, as were other Swedish politicians, to prevent a contagion of the Russian February Revolution to Sweden. At the same time, soldiers from the Åland Jäger (hunters) regiment succeeded in manoeuvring a German submarine with explosives through Åland's Russian mining belt in order to sink the boats of a Russian submarine unit in Mariehamn. On August 20th, 1917, a meeting with a considerable number of participants took place in Finström. They had decided to appeal to the Swedish king and government to support the reunification of the Åland islands with Sweden. They also pinned their hopes on Nils Edén, who had been appointed prime minister of Sweden since October 19th, 1917, and who, in principle, supported the Åland activists and the “white” Finns, but who, on the other hand, was anxious

to avoid any impression that Sweden collaborated with the Germans (Gerdner, N.D.). And when, shortly after the October Revolution, the new Soviet government proclaimed that all nations and ethnic groups of the former Russian Empire should decide for themselves which form of government they wanted to choose and to which state they wanted to belong, the principle of national self-government was enforced even on a political basis. The people of Åland at least took this proclamation seriously by organising a voluntary plebiscite, which mobilised 95% of all Åland inhabitants then present on the islands to sign an address to the Swedish king and people. This address stated that it was “the population of Åland’s earnest wish and firm will to achieve the region’s integration into the Swedish Empire”. However, the Åland delegation didn’t succeed in getting the address past Russian border controls to present it both to the Swedish king Gustaf V (who ruled between 1907–1950) and to the then-minister for foreign affairs Johannes Hellner (1866–1947) before February 3rd, 1918. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Swedish government, which, on January 16th, had officially expressed hopes that the Åland question would come to a satisfying solution after the independence of Finland, had failed to establish contact with the Russian government. Moreover, the Finnish Civil War broke out in January 1918, augmenting ethnic and territorial questions about Åland with the ideological hatred between the “Red Guards” (communists) and the “White Guards” (anticommunists) (Dreijer, 1972, pp. 19–26; Gihl et al., 1951; Bondestam, 1972; Rotkirch, 1986, pp. 364–365).

The Finnish Civil War flashed over to Åland on 10th February, when a unit of 460 White Guard members of the Vakka-Suomi region fled from the town of Uusikaupunki (in Swedish, *Nystad*), crossed the frozen sea and landed on the islands. Some minor clashes occurred with Soviet soldiers, but they were not really eager to fight the Finns and hurried to catch the open sea. Meanwhile, the Åland delegation, supported by parts of the Swedish press, had urged the Swedish government to take action, if not for the reunification of the Åland Islands with Sweden, then at least for the humanitarian cause to evacuate Swedish citizens from mainland Finland via Pori (in Swedish, *Björneborg*) and the Åland Islands. On February 13th, the Swedish government actually decided to send troops to Åland in order to protect the islands’ inhabitants from any violent acts carried out by Russian and Finnish troops and to start negotiations with the Russian government. These negotiations were stopped, though, by the activities of Turku Red Guardists, who, on February 17th, ferried themselves to Åland in order to fight the Swedes and the Finnish White Guards. A short encounter ended on the same day with only a handful of

casualties. But when the situation escalated once again, Sweden urged the Finnish White Guards to leave the islands by spreading among the troops an order allegedly given by General Carl Gustav Mannerheim (1867–1951) that the Åland White Guards had to be ferried over to the Finnish mainland. They actually left Åland on 20th February. At the same time, Sweden sent more troops in order to press Russia to leave the islands, which promptly happened (Anderson, 1919; Berglund, 2017).

German Occupation

One week later, the situation on the islands changed radically. After the lapse of the Russian-German armistice on February 18th, German troops invaded Finland and the Åland Islands as part of “Operation Faustschlag” (Operation Punch). Its background was to secure, in the North, access to the Arctic Sea, to break the Murmansk railway, and to control Petrograd (before 1914: St. Petersburg). Maybe even more far-reaching aims, such as transforming the Baltic Sea into a German inland sea, played a certain role. The Åland Islands as such were only one little piece in a greater design, but they served as a stepping stone for count Rüdiger von der Goltz’ (1865–1946) “Ostseedivision” to disembark on the southwestern coasts of Finland. One of the results of Operation Faustschlag was that the Swedish and German government agreed, on March 5th, 1918, to share the islands between Sweden, Germany, and White Finland. Any remaining Russian soldiers were captured, and Russian vessels confiscated. Sweden pulled its troops out little by little. The last Swedish military units retreated on May 26th, 1918. By contrast, the Germans stayed until September 1918 (Fleischmann, 1918; New York Times, 1918; Tuchtenhagen, 2004; Hecker-Stampehl et al., 2004, pp. 145–164; Eerola, 2001; Vainio, 2008, pp. 10–11; Rotkirch, 1986, pp. 365–366).

The Åland Convention on Neutrality and Demilitarisation (1921)

After the official end of the war, Swedish nationalist groups hoped that the question of the reunification of Åland with Sweden could be included in the discussions preceding the Treaty of Versailles, which never materialised. Even a new referendum in 1919, one which brought together 9,900 (96.4%) of roughly 10,000 potential voters and an affirmation of over 95% to join the islands to Sweden, had little to no effect (Lindqvist, 2014). The Åland question at this time had turned from a matter of regional activism to an ideological and strategic struggle between Sweden and

Finland. During the 19th century, Swedish nationalist sentiment had grown strong, due to, among other things, the loss of Finland in 1809, the fortification of the Åland Islands in the 1830s, and the loss of Norway in 1905. From the Swedish political elites' and army officers' point of view, the loser nation that was Sweden now needed some kind of foreign policy success in order to regain its national dignity. Finnish intellectuals and political leaders in turn had struggled to retain Finnish autonomy and fought Russification fiercely. They had, since the middle of the 19th century, constructed a Finnish identity, whose concept of an enemy not only included Russian nationalism, but also a past of Swedish rule in Finland. The Åland activists' argument that the islands should return, due to their Swedish past, language, and culture, to the kingdom of Sweden, resembled a battle cry to Finnish nationalists. As a consequence, the new Finnish government resolutely declined to cede the Åland Islands to Sweden, but at least offered cultural and administrative autonomy to their inhabitants. The Åland inhabitants, in turn, declined the compromise and thus a stand-off ensued (Nordman, 1986, pp. 139–158; Norman, 1986, pp. 177–213).

The British government therefore urged Sweden to commit the Swedish-Finnish dispute to the League of Nations, founded as a result of the Paris peace conference in January 1920, but Stockholm refused. Only after the British had made use of its right to initiate debates in the League's sessions and the case of Åland had come before the Council of the League of Nations on 9th July, 1920, were international negotiations resumed (Modeen 1973, pp. 20–56).² On April 16th, 1921, the League's Åland Commission vehemently stressed Finland's right to sovereignty and recommended before the League's Council that Åland should become part of the recently-founded Finnish state (League of Nations, 1921d; Summers, 2007, pp. 410–417).³ This position was confirmed by the Council

² Despite the Finnish government's protests, which were based on the claim that the Åland question would be, from a political perspective, a purely domestic problem, the League started its work immediately. See the Report of the International Committee of Jurists, League of Nations Official Journal, Special Supplement no. 3, October 1920. League of Nations, Council, Minutes of the Ninth Session of the Council of the League of Nations Held in Paris, September 16–20, 1920. League of Nations, Official Journal, 2 (Jan–Feb 1921), p. 78. Conclusions of the Cabinet meeting of 30th September 1920 (National Archives, CAB 23/22/15). For the complete procedure, see Tore Modeen: *De folkrättsliga garantierna för bevarandet av Ålandsöarnas nationella karaktär*. Mariehamn: Ålands kulturstiftelse, 1973 (= *Skrifter utgivna av Ålands kulturstiftelse VII*), pp. 20–56.

³ The Commission of Jurists consisted of former Swiss president Felix Caloner (1863–1952), former Belgian foreign minister Eugène Beyens (1855–1934), and former

(League of Nations Official Journal, 1921b, pp. 697–701). On October 20th, 1921, Sweden, Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Denmark, Poland, Estonia, and Latvia signed a convention to resolve the Åland question not only in the context of the new international system of the Baltic Sea region, but also by recognition of Europe's victorious powers, namely, Great Britain and France. On the basis of the so-called *Ålandservitüd* of 1856, the islands should remain demilitarised, obtain neutral status, and enjoy internal autonomy. Essentially, Finland had to guarantee its inhabitants the right to use the Swedish language, allow them to live according to their traditional culture and customs, and grant specific rights on land property and taxes (Clerc, 2010, pp. 53–70; Hannikainen, 1993, pp. 13–14; Hannikainen, 1954, pp. 614–651, 619–626; Björkholm, Rosas, 1990, Barros, 1968, pp. 3–4; Rotkirch, 1986, pp. 367–370).

The situation had thus been remedied between Sweden and Finland. But a question mark remained, since the Soviet Union had not been invited to participate in the negotiations, let alone sign the treaty. For the time being, however, the Ålanders could start building their autonomy. On June 9th, 1922, the islands' parliament, the *lagting*, met for the first time. It was that very day, which henceforward became the “Day of Ålands Autonomy” (in Swedish, *Ålands självstyrelsedag*) (Jungar, 1986, pp. 159–172; Eriksson, Johansson, Sundback, 2006).

After 1921

The governments of Sweden and Finland were aware, though, that by signing the 1921 convention, the Åland Islands would not become a permanently quiet place. In the years between the wars, they secretly discussed a plan of a joint defence of the islands in case of a Soviet assault on Åland's neutrality. In this so-called “Stockholm-Plan” (or “Åland-Plan”), formulated in 1938, both governments acted on the assumption that Åland in principle had to be kept demilitarised. Finland should, however, have the right to use some of the southerly islands in order to install military facilities for the prevention of Soviet violations. But the Stockholm Plan was not popular among the islanders, and in the autumn of 1938, peasants demonstrated against the plan in the streets of Mariehamn. Nevertheless, the plan was met with the consent of the signatory powers in January 1939. A protest note, sent to the League of

US-ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Emil Nielsen (no life data available). These “Rapporteurs” delivered their report to the Council on 16th April, 1921. League of Nations, Council documents B 7 21/68/106, 16 April 1921.

Nations by the Åland opposition, arrived too late and was thus rendered immaterial. Finally, it was the Soviet Union that vetoed and obviated the plan's implementation (Gustavsson, 2012; Rotkirch, 1986, pp. 370–371).

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23rd, 1939), which, *inter alia*, divided the Baltic Sea region into a German and a Soviet sphere of influence, produced new tensions and reminded Sweden and Finland of the unsettled matter of the Stockholm Plan. In Sweden, discussions concerning implementation restarted, but were eventually abandoned on October 24th, 1939, despite a small number of violations of Finnish territorial waters by Soviet war vessels. When Soviet troops crossed the Finnish border more than a month later (November 30th), war was a fact, and Sweden proclaimed neutrality. The defence of the Åland Islands was now an exclusively Finnish matter. The islands were occupied by regular Finnish troops, supplemented by units of Åland volunteers. The territorial waters around the islands were mined.

After the Winter War (30th November 1939 – 13th March 1940), Finland was forced to abandon the Åland volunteer units and to demilitarise the islands, a procedure thoroughly controlled by Soviet troops. When the so-called “Continuation War” (25th June 1941 – 19th September 1944) broke out in 1941, the islands were again occupied by Finnish troops and defended by 700 volunteers, but had to return to the stipulations of 1940 after the truce of 1944. In 1947, the demilitarisation of the Ålands was confirmed during the preliminary negotiations for a Finnish-Soviet peace treaty in Paris 1947 (Ålands landskapsregering, N.D.).

Despite political tensions in Cold War Europe and repeated violations of Finnish and Swedish territorial waters by Russian submarines and other war vessels, the time after 1945 was for the Åland Islands a period of Nordic and European integration and peaceful building of the islands' fishery, shipping, and trade connections. In 1954, Åland was given the right to use its own flag. In 1970, the islands became a member of the Nordic Council. The foundation of the “Peace Institute” (*Ålands fredsinstitut*) in 1992 established, worldwide, the “Åland model” as a pattern for demilitarisation and neutrality politics as well as for the handling of international conflicts and minority questions. A referendum of the Åland inhabitants in 1994 resulted in the islands' EU membership one year later. In accordance with Finland, the EURO currency replaced the hitherto used Finnish Mark in 2002 (Tudeer, 1993, pp. 107–130; Ålands fredsinstitut, N.D.; Högman, 1986, pp. 117–137; Hannikainen, Horn, 1997).

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine War in February 2022, the Åland Islands are once again one of the hot spots of a possible Russian assault on Finland, Sweden, or some of the NATO member states. This hazardous

situation has even increased since Finland's applying for NATO membership in May 2022. So far, Finland, contrary to Sweden in the case of Gotland, and in accordance with the interests of the islands' population, insists on the demilitarised status of the islands. The fact remains though, that the Åland islands can, technically speaking, easily be reached either by Russian missiles or Russian vessels and invasion forces. And as soon as Finland and Sweden are fully-fledged NATO members, the islands will, in a NATO-alliance sense, be at the centre of attention again.

Conclusions

Ever since 1809, the Åland Islands' status was closely connected to the question of its geopolitical and geostrategic significance for the neighbouring states. When Sweden lost Finland after the Swedish-Russian War of 1808–1809, its main interest was to prevent Russia from using the islands as a military base for potential assaults on mainland Sweden. Napoleon's famous bon mot that the Åland Islands represented a pistol pointed at the heart of Sweden put it in a nutshell. That Russia would not violate Sweden's territorial waters in the Gulf of Finland was even in the interest of Great Britain and France. This was the reason why they, after the end of the Crimean War, forced Russia to sign a peace treaty that determined the demilitarisation and neutralisation of the Åland Islands. Its stipulations formed a *leitmotif* of all treaties and other legal documents up to the present day.

A second central theme was the question of the Åland Islands' political affiliation. Immediately after the breakdown of the Russian Empire in 1917, four options were available: 1) that the islands remained part of the Grand Duchy and Republic of Finland respectively, 2) that they be returned to Sweden for historical and cultural reasons, 3) that they be returned to Russia for military reasons, and 4) that they be turned over to Germany, the dominant sea power of the time and presumably in the future. Given the developing civil war in Finland, the first option seemed doubtful. The second option seemed logical, but Sweden's political will did not prove to be strong enough to realise the project. The third option depended on the future of the Soviet Union and its gaining of power in foreign policy questions. The fourth option, for several months, seemed to be the most likely, but with the breakdown of the German Empire in November 1918 vanished as a probable scenario. However, the very fact that there at all existed four options in 1917–1918 required an international solution, eventually formulated by a 1921 convention. This 1921 convention found answers to the military question and to the problem of

a political affiliation, but could not prevent a return to traditional military and political patterns and a questioning of the 1856 and 1921 formulas in times of crisis (such as World War II). It seems that the process of Nordic and EU integration and the growing weakness of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation led to a preliminary stabilisation of the Åland question.

Given that the present deterioration of the Baltic's security lies as a consequence of the Ukraine War (since 24th February 2022), this situation could rapidly change. On the other hand, Russia's threat on North-eastern Europe will intensify Swedish-Finnish military co-operation and political integration, e.g., in the context of future NATO membership having been discussed for several years in both countries only to be formally applied for in May 2022 (Tolgfors, 2016. Lindberg, 2021). For Finland, there even is a domestic dimension. The Åland Islands are, though autonomous, part of Finland's Swedish-speaking community, and their official language, Swedish, is an official language in Finland. Accordingly, no "foreign body sensation" exists in Finland as regards the Åland Islands. In this sense, Åland is an integral part of the Finnish state and a cultural bridge to Sweden. And, for historical reasons, there is a strong sense of belonging together, in spite of Finland's Russian imperial affiliation and occasional disputes between Finland and Sweden after Finland's independence (Tarkiainen, 2008; Villstrand, 2009; Engman, 2016; Meinander, 2016; Tandefelt, 2015; Stjernfelt, 1991). This also means that both nations will jointly and decidedly resist any Russian claim on the Åland Islands in the future.

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