

4th December 2007

Prime Minister Vanhanen at the unveiling of the logo and opening of the website to commemorate the events of the year 1809

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year marks the 90th anniversary of Finland's independence and the 450th anniversary of the death of Mikael Agricola, Bishop of Turku and the father of standard Finnish. Last year we remembered the birth of J.V. Snellman and his life's work. Now we are preparing to commemorate the emergence of an autonomous Finland in 1809 following the conflict between Russia and Sweden known as the Finnish War.

These commemorative years serve as a reminder of the long development that Finnish culture and society underwent during the period of Swedish rule, the turbulent years of 1808 and 1809 and then autonomy. This historical background paved way for the emergence of an independent, stable and democratic state which later acceded to the European Union.

It is only logical that we Finns have the best understanding of our country and the history of its neighbourhood relations. The lesson from 2009, as an anniversary year, is that the internal and external events shaping Finland have always been linked to the historical events of our continent and beyond.

The Napoleonic Wars and the Treaties of Tilsit and Erfurt, signed between Alexander I and Napoleon, provide the historical setting for the Finnish War, the Diet of Porvoo, the Treaty of Hamina and the establishment of central administration in Finland.

When appointing the delegation and committee for the year 1809, the underlying premise was that in a democratic society, it is not for the State to offer historical truths about past events That should be left to researchers. The idea is also to let the history speak for itself.

Researchers, of course, have various views on the historical events. It is already clear, even at this stage, that the commemorations for the year 1809 will be much more than a trotting-out of old interpretations; they promise to be an unprecedented exploration of Finnish history and so of the conscious and unconscious layers of the Finnish mindset. With the help of C.E. Mannerheim's archive, unexpectedly made available last year, we start on our exploration today with a look at what really happened in Helsinki and the Suomenlinna Sea Fortress in spring 1808.

The general aim of the 1809 commemorations is to draw on current research to promote and refine our thinking about the events that took place in 1809 and, in so doing, to provide a path to a deeper understanding of our own period. I also hope that by expanding our understanding of this very significant era in Finnish history, and the European background to it, we can help people to think about the future of Finland in this wider context.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past year, the 1809 Committee and a group of experts have been fleshing out the proposals adopted by the 1809 Delegation in January 2006.

In 2008 and 2009, the State will organise four major bicentenary events. At the same time, NGOs, associations, municipalities, state bodies and agencies and the media are being encouraged to take the initiative and organise related events.

It is also very positive that our neighbouring countries have shown interest in the bicentenary. Foreign Minister Carl Bildt chairs a related delegation in Sweden, and Russia is planning to set up a similar body. In Finland and Sweden, the projects will focus on strengthening current and future cooperation. In April 2009, Finland will host a joint session of the Finnish and Swedish Governments.

I wish, already now, to express my warmest thanks to the Hanasaari Swedish-Finnish Cultural Centre and many other Finnish-Swedish societies for their active involvement. We have a unique opportunity to commemorate our long history together with Sweden and reinforce the connections between our two countries.

I also believe that the bicentenary will open new prospects for developing our bilateral relations with Russia. The Finland-Russia Society will have a lot to offer in connection with this.

The main events will include scientific conferences focusing on the outbreak of the Finnish War, events relating to the Diet of Porvoo, a conference on the future of the Baltic Sea linked to the Treaty of Hamina, and sessions of the Finnish Government and highest courts in Turku commemorating the opening session of the Governing Council of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland which was held almost two hundred years ago on the banks of the River Aura. All these events will be organised in cooperation with the towns and villages where they are to be held, and numerous other partners including the Society of the Friends of History, the Finnish Historical Society and the Centrum Balticum.

A series of local events commemorating the year 1809 will be launched in February next year and they will mainly follow the sequence of the Finnish War. Battles and other war events will be commemorated in various parts of Finland through local initiatives. A number of events will be organised in the eastern, western and south-western parts of Finland to mark the battles of the Finnish War and related events.

Various societies will organise events following the course of the war on the basis of their own interests. My sincere thanks for this expression of enthusiastic initiative. I encourage all parties to follow the example.

The website to be opened today will provide detailed information on dozens of events and the historical era as a whole in a skilled and interesting manner. I intend to follow the sequence of events by reading daily excerpts from the years 1808 and 1809 on the website. I hope that the website will bring history closer to the younger generation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Like the whole bicentenary project, the website provides a common forum for various kinds of activities without conditions. The events will help to clarify our ideas about what happened 200 years ago.

In their joint meetings and seminars, the members of the 1809 Delegation and expert group have already noticed that school-book type generalisations about the Finnish War or Diet of Porvoo do not offer a comprehensive picture of the past events. This phenomenon is very interestingly illustrated in Osmo Jussila's latest work on the great myths of the Finnish history.

We now know what happened after the year 1809 and we tend to think that it was inevitable that events then resulted in an independent Finland. However, making forecasts about the future must have been just as difficult as it is today, if not more so. We had an age-old history of 600 years together with Sweden. The following centuries offered lots of work opportunities for each generation and the end-product of this development was an independent and modern welfare state.

Now that eighteen months have passed since the appointment of the 1809 Delegation, Committee and expert group, they have been able to provide us with certain general knowledge about the influential people of the time: the Mannerheims, Sprengtportens, Tengströms, Armfelts and numerous other.

They seem to have been blessed with a somewhat persistent characteristic, typical of the Finnish people, which is also symbolised in the theme and logos for the commemoration year. In 1808 and 1809, they did not give up but rather, with due regard for the prevailing European realities, took the initiative to influence the future development of their country and its people.

Nowadays, one of the key terms in international politics is nation building". In today's international terms, the first generation established an autonomous administration for this country and the following generations have continued the building process the result of which is a nation based - in J.V. Snellman's words – on civilised patriotism.

The nation was anything but completed in the first years of autonomy. Nevertheless, it was precisely at that time in history when the preconditions for the nation were laid. We had the tools to start building a nation.

This provides an excellent opportunity to draw a parallel between the post 1809 and post 1944 situations – and comment the new version of Väinö Linna's *Unknown soldier* currently on stage at the National Theatre. The play ends with a chorus repeating second lieutenant Jalovaara's grim monologue: "Finland is dead. Finland is dead." It is certain that at the end of the Finnish War in 1809, many people were afraid for Finland just like Linna's second lieutenant Jalovaara who cried his anguish alone in the woods. But this anguished cry did not become the tune for Jalovaara's generation in 1944 or for second lieutenant Stool's generation in 1809 – nor will it be tune for today's Finns.

We have always wiped away the tears. We have learned from the past but we are not its prisoners. We have always taken the initiative. We have looked to the future and put our faith in hard work and education. The years 1808 and 1809 paved way for this kind of civilised patriotism. Thus, the theme for the commemoration year is "Building a nation".

The logo with its strongly profiled map symbolises the rise of a civilised European nation between two countries and two worlds. This trajectory and the efforts behind it are described through a combination of four well-known Finnish paintings: *March of the Pori Regiment Soldiers in the 1808-09 War* by Albert Edelfelt, *Emperor Alexander I Opening the Diet of Porvoo* by Robert Wilhelm Ekman, *Log Floaters* by Pekka Halonen, and *Elementary School* by Magnus Enckell.

Today, Finland, Europe and indeed the human race still face enormous challenges but opportunities are abundant, too, if we only trust on work and civilisation and on the power of democracy based on these two.

With these thoughts, I open the website for the year 1809 and hope it will serve as a source of information and inspiration for our generations.