

Europe in Upheaval – the Era of the Napoleonic Wars

Hanasaari, Finland, 21-23.2.2008

Opening of the conference

**Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen**

**Years 1808 and 1809. At least Finland won in the end.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

On this day, or more precisely, at this very moment, 200 hundred years ago, Russian troops crossed the Kymijoki river, then the border between Russia and Sweden, at Ahvenkoski. This marked the beginning of an armed conflict between Russia and Sweden, later to be known also as the Finnish War. In the relations between the two countries it brought to a conclusion the development that had begun a hundred years before in the battle of Poltava. For Finland, the war was just another in a long chain of conflicts. This time, however, the hostilities opened completely new perspectives and they were also seized.

As is well known, the treaty signed between Tsar Alexander I and Napoleon in Tilsit in July of the previous year provided the historical setting for the events. The purpose of the treaty was to force Sweden to give up its alliance with England.

The decision to attack was made in St Petersburg towards the end of 1807 and General Buxhoevden began to concentrate troops of the Russian army in the Hamina region. In mid January 1808, a war committee led by Field Marshal Klingspor was established in Stockholm. It prepared a plan for the defence of Finland – the chosen tactic was to withdraw all the way to the province of Oulu.

The confrontation, together with international developments, led to a situation which changed the course of history. This became clear only a year after the outbreak of the war, in February 1809.

Due to its heavy losses in Finland and Pomerania Sweden was caught up in an internal crisis. Russia soon expanded its ambitions and decided to keep the whole of Finland and thus consolidate its position on the Baltic Sea. At the same time, however, Russia wanted to bring the Finnish War to a swift conclusion so as not to tie up its troops on the distant front and face the same fate as Napoleon did in Spain. In Finland, preparations for convening the Porvoo Diet took place in an atmosphere of instability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The years 1808 and 1809 mark important events in Finnish history and they are usually commemorated every quarter of a century. They serve as a reminder of the long history during the Swedish reign and the turbulent period which ended with an autonomous Finland. This historical evolution paved the way for the emergence of an independent, democratic state that would later become a member of the European Union.

It is only logical that we Finns have the best understanding of our own history and our relations with our neighbours. The years we now commemorate emphasize the fact that our internal events have always had a close link to the historical developments of our continent.

We have had two parallel traditions to commemorate the years 1808 and 1809, depending on the needs of the time. At times, emphasis has been on the heroic battles of the Finnish War, in the spirit of our national poet J.L. Runeberg. On other occasions, the main focus has been on the significance of the Porvoo Diet, the benevolence of the Russian emperor and the role of realism in Finland's

policies. However, the current research seems to analyse the ways in which international developments, the war, active statesmanship and the moral dilemmas faced in those years were all in fact linked to each other.

In today's world, we have the privilege of examining the Finnish War, the guerrilla action of the time and the practised politics in a manner which gives due respect to them all and reveals links between the events themselves and the wider European background.

The underlying premise for the commemorations of the year 1809 is that it is not for a democratic state to offer truths about what has happened in history. That should be left to researchers. The idea is to let history speak for itself. Finnish historians have been closely involved in the preparations for the commemoration events and I extend my warm thanks for their diligence.

I am confident that this conference will expand and deepen our understanding of the causes and effects of what happened in Europe and in Finland 200 years ago. I am also confident that this will help us also to understand our future in a wider context. This is a challenge for the media, too.

Researchers, of course, have varying views of history. Therefore, it is already evident that the conference will not be a mere series of repetitions of past interpretations. On the contrary, the conference is likely to offer an unprecedented excursion to the history of Europe and Finland and, therefore to conscious and subconscious layers of the Finnish mind-set.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During 2008 and 2009, there will be five main bicentenary commemoration events in this country. NGOs, public and private societies, municipalities, government agencies and other public bodies, and the media, are encouraged to take the initiative and organise related events. A series of local events will be launched during the spring and will mainly replicate the sequence of events of the Finnish War, first of them at Ahvenkoski on this very moment.

I extend my sincere thanks for initiatives in civil society and I encourage all parties not yet involved to follow the proactive examples.

It is also positive that our neighbouring countries have shown interest in the bicentenary. Foreign Minister Carl Bildt chairs a related committee in Sweden. We Finns have every reason to value our 600-year connections with Sweden and to use the opportunities offered by the commemoration year to strengthen future cooperation. We naturally have high esteem for the hundred years of autonomy, too. Russia is also to appoint a delegation for the commemoration year and therefore we can expect joint projects between Finland and Russia, too.

I recommend that you visit the commemoration year website at [www.1809.fi](http://www.1809.fi) which is a true treasure trove of relevant historical information. I personally intend to visit the website and follow the sequence of events by reading its 200 years old "daily head lines".

Ladies and gentlemen,

We Finns, quite understandably, tend to think that it was inevitable that the events that took place two hundred years ago finally resulted in an independent Finland. However, making forecasts then about the future must have been just as difficult as it is today, if not more so.

We had experienced our longest historical continuum of 600 years together with Sweden. This relationship had made us part of western culture. The following centuries offered numerous challenges for each generation. We Finns, however, managed to meet the challenges and the end-product of this process was an independent and advanced welfare state.

Nowadays, one of the key terms in international politics is "nation building". When Finland became in the connection with the Russian empire, a nation among other nations, we managed to hold on to our western judicial tradition, developed during the centuries with Swedish connection, and to build an autonomous central administration on the basis of this heritage.

However, in modern terms, the nation was anything but complete. Nevertheless, it was precisely at that time in history when many conditions for steady progress and national awakening were laid. The motto for the commemoration year is "Building a nation" and its visual designs symbolise the importance to that building process of education, hard work and the wider European heritage.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome the international conference participants to Finland and I wish you all a very successful meeting.

As Chairman of the 1809 Delegation, I wish to thank the Finnish Historical Society and the Hanasaari Swedish-Finnish Cultural Centre for organising the conference. My thanks go also to the Finnish History Congress which focused on the same period of history and took place in Lahti a short time ago.

Today, as the Prime Minister of Finland, the country which only recently held the Presidency of the European Union, I would like make yet another observation which has also been reflected in the seminars and other related preparatory events of our commemoration year.

We now know how happily everything turned out for Finland and for Sweden. As far as our own country is concerned, we might even say that Europe was in conflict, our Sweden fought a war with Russia and, at least Finland won in the end.

However, as a Prime Minister of our own time, I have not witnessed in international politics a single happy coincidence or a naively made decision. It is hard to believe that it was different 200 years ago. Good results always require doers and targeted action. It seems that 200 years ago Finns with due account of the prevailing European realities, took the initiative to influence the future development of their country.

Questions concerning the perspectives of a small nation in today's international architecture and turmoil remain equally important. In my opinion, it is vital to maintain one's ability to take initiative and combine a certain civilised patriotism with the real ongoing European and global changes. To achieve this today, we Finns can draw on the growing knowledge and deepening understanding of our earlier experiences. The same knowledge might also benefit those who have been in the process of building a nation in today's world.

History, therefore, is science for future. With these words, allow me to open this conference and wish you a very successful gathering.