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THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FEBRUARY MANIFESTO OF 1899

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In Finnish historiography as well as in that of many other countries, the February Manifesto of 1899 has been regarded as the single most significant aspect of Russification in Finland. Accordingly, the Manifesto was the basis and framework for all subsequent measures of Russification. It was the beginning and foundation of the years of tsarist oppression, the breach of the Imperial oath, a coup d'état, a sudden bombshell from St. Petersburg destroying the harmonious relationship between the tsar and the Finnish people. Many other vivid and emotional expressions have described this action.

The following citations are from some of the most well-known English-language textbooks on Finnish history. Eino Jutikkala and Kauko Pirinen (under the subtitle "The Coup d'État of Nicholas II") describe the situation as follows:

Conflicts on individual issues could have been settled, however, had not Russian nationalism—for ideological reasons—set as its goal the Russification of Finland. . . . Russification of Finland for the sheer sake of Russification was what motivated the actions of Nicholas Bobrikov. . . . Before the Diet could work out the final form of the bill, which then gained its unanimous approval, the Czar carried out a *coup d'état*. . . . By a manifesto on the 15th of February, 1899, the Czar confirmed the regulations for imperial legislation.¹

John Wuorinen (under the subtitle "The Menace of Russification") makes the following statement:

The real process of Russification was begun in 1899. An imperial manifesto issued on February 15 of that year placed nearly all Finnish legislation under the surveillance of the Russian government. . . . This meant that the constitution and the laws of Finland would in the future be "local laws" only and that their impor-

tance and scope would be arbitrarily determined in St. Petersburg. If this policy were carried out, Finnish autonomy would soon become a meaningless abstraction.²

In the same vein, L. A. Puntila's view is suggested in the following passage:

Nicholas II signed Bobrikov's proposal—the so-called February Manifesto—on February 15, 1899. This edict extended Russian autocracy to Finland. In violation of the constitution which he had confirmed, Nicholas himself was to decide which laws concerned the realm as a whole; the Finnish Diet could do no more than express its opinion. Bobrikov subsequently received unlimited authority to destroy Finland's special status.³

However, this Finnish-constitutional line of interpretation is not limited to textbooks. We even find it in a recent scholarly study, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*:

The perils inherent in the manifesto were clear. The Senate and the Diet could offer opinions on proposed legislation, and the final decision was made in St. Petersburg. There was no enumeration of the subjects which could fall within the purview of the arrangement; by sweeping interpretation it could entirely subvert Finland's autonomy and render the Diet a nullity. The door, as Mechelin remarked, "stood open to any Russian claims at all."⁴

At the time of its implementation, the main Finnish arguments against the Manifesto were the following:

1. Limiting the Diet of Finland to an advisory role in general legislation was contrary to the Finnish constitution and a change from previous practice.
2. Because there was no definition of the sphere of general legislation, any Finnish law could be said to have general significance and consequently separate Finnish legislation would be gradually abolished.
3. According to the Manifesto, Russian officials and organs could prepare laws for Finland, and Finnish legislation was subordinated as "local" to the general Russian legislation; this was also contrary to the constitution and the previous assurances of the tsars.

The Russian counter-arguments were as follows:

1. It was unreasonable that the Diet of one part of the Empire should have the power to veto general legislation.
2. The tsar had always had the right to decide which laws were general and which local. Finnish legislation had been local in nature from the beginning and subordinated to the general.
3. The Finnish local legislation system remained intact as before 1899; Russian officials were consulted on general legislation concerning Finland.

Let us look at these arguments in more detail.

The Role of the Diet

In the Committee preparing the Manifesto, presided over by Grand Duke Mikhail, the interim Secretary of State for Finland opposed the Russian proposal to give the Diet only an advisory role, arguing that the Finnish Estates (Diet) had always had the right of decision (*pravo resheniia*) confirmed by all Russian tsars, and it required this power in general legislation because no law could be implemented in Finland without the consent of the Diet.⁵ The Russian members of the Committee maintained that it was unfair for a Diet in one corner of the vast Empire to have the power of veto over legislation concerning the entire state. Subsequently, the Finns said that they did not demand the power of veto because they did not want to participate in general legislation at all; general legislation affecting Finland was unnecessary and, therefore, so was the power of veto. Instead of "general laws" there were only "common laws," which could be enacted by mutual and equal agreements as was usual between sovereign states.⁶

The main practical consequence of this Finnish demand for a decisive role would have been that the Russian State Council could not change the decision of the Finnish Diet; it could only express its opinion on whether the proposed Finnish law was acceptable or not. This had been the guiding principle in the relationship between the tsar and the Diet. The tsar accepted or rejected the answer of the Diet but did not change it. It is perhaps useful to note here that in spite of this practice—or at least not contrary to it—the role of the Diet in local Finnish legislation had also been advisory, as it had already been in the Porvoo Diet of 1809, although the Finns never admitted this and although in Mikhail's Committee the Russians were willing to give the Diet a decisive role.⁷ It is true that the tsars had never changed the answers of the Diet; however, they always achieved their objectives by introducing the same proposal into the Diet so many times that finally an acceptable answer was returned. The Diet was ultimately "directed"—the term used at the time—by high advisors of the tsar.

At this point, one might ask:

1. What was the previous relationship of the State Council in St. Petersburg and the Finnish Diet?
2. Was the State Council above the Diet or was it positioned parallel to the common Emperor?
3. Had this Finnish demand that the State Council could not change the decisions of the Diet, i.e., that they were in a parallel position, a foundation in previous practice?

The problem here is that actually there was no such practice: the Finnish Diet and the State Council never met in common legislation before 1899. On the Finnish side, the Senate was the main counterpart to the State Council. Before 1863, the Senate often had the role of the Diet and at least in those cases the State Council was clearly above the Senate and changed its decisions.⁸ It is interesting to note that according to the February Manifesto the State Council and the Senate were still considered counterparts even though the Diet assembled regularly; the Finnish senators, not

the deputies of the Diet, should have been sent to the State Council.

After 1863, the Finnish Diet often had as its counterpart not the State Council but a minister or the Holy Synod. In the preparation of the money law of 1877 (the change from a silver to a gold monetary system) the Diet was equal to the Minister of Finance, and in the preparation of the conscription law of 1878 to the Minister of War (even though the Minister himself thought he was above the Diet). While formulating the criminal code of 1894 and of the state secrets law of 1898, the Diet was tightly controlled by the Minister of Justice.⁹

Despite the pressure imposed by these ministries, the deputies of the Diet began to see their role as decisive in all legislation inside Finland, irrespective of Russian views to the contrary. Given this background it is understandable that it was precisely the introduction of the new conscription law that led to the conflict known as "the years of oppression." The conscription law of 1878 was the first general law directly involving the Finnish Diet. When the Minister of War, Dimitri Miliutin, was forced to compromise due to the crisis created by the Russo-Turkish War, there developed among the deputies a firm conviction that they could have the decisive power in such matters.

The Issue of the Sphere of General Legislation

If the sphere of general legislation was not defined, any Finnish law could be declared general in nature and then enacted in a Russian general order. In that way the separate Finnish sphere of legislation would gradually disappear. This accusation by the Finnish side is partly accurate. Because Finland was a part of the Russian Empire, all laws initiated in Finland could be said to concern other parts of the Empire as well. But, as the Russian side noted, this had already been true before the February Manifesto, at least since the 1891 decree authorizing a Russian minister to decide whether or not a proposed Finnish law was general in nature.¹⁰

The abolition of separate Finnish legislation was not, however, the goal of the February Manifesto and its authors, at least not in this phase. There was a special assurance in the Manifesto that local Finnish legislation would remain intact. The Russians pointed out that the sphere of general legislation had not been defined before the Manifesto; the tsar had always decided the boundary case by case.

When the Finnish side on Bunge's committee (which did the basic work on the Manifesto) prepared the list of matters belonging to the sphere of general legislation, the Russian side could generally accept it because it included those issues which had previously been the subject of common legislation. The only points which were missing and noted by the Russians were military affairs and the laws concerning the monetary system.¹¹ It is evident that in practice the Manifesto would have resulted in a reduction of the Finnish sphere of legislation, if it had worked, but this could also have happened without the Manifesto.

The only practical example of how the Manifesto might have worked

is the law of general legislation of 1910 and the so-called "great Russification program" of 1914, based on the 1910 law (i.e., the new law of general legislation—the new "February Manifesto"). The law of 1910 defined the sphere of general legislation, and it focused mainly on military affairs, maintenance of public order, the rights of Russians in Finland, and the relationship between Russian and Finnish institutions. The program of 1914 also presupposed the possibility of enacting general laws in the Finnish local order (in 4 out of 47 laws). Between 1910 and 1914 Russian officials even transferred some affairs from general to local order for purely pragmatic reasons. The Finnish Diet existed and functioned in the years of 1910-1914 although there was political conflicts which paralyzed its work.¹² I would conclude that the goal of the tsarist regime was not to abolish the separate sphere of Finnish legislation, but only to submit it to the more effective control of the central government in those affairs defined as general in the law of 1910.

The Issue of Russian Officials Preparing Laws for Finland

The third main point, or consequence anticipated and opposed by Finns, was that according to the Manifesto Russian officials, together with Finnish ones, could prepare laws for Finland. This was contrary to the assurances of Alexander I, who had promised to govern Finland only with the assistance of Finnish officials. According to the Finnish view, the tsar would naturally consult his Russian advisors on matters concerning both Russia and Finland, but there should not be any mixed preparatory work or system. However, Alexander I never actually gave the promise to which the Finns referred. Their assumption was only based on an interpretation of the "gramota" (confirmation) given in Porvoo in 1809 and of the Swedish Form of Government of 1772 and the Union and Security Act of 1789, where King Gustav III had promised to nominate only "native Swedes" to state offices. On the other hand, it is true that in practice Finnish affairs were presented to the Emperor by a Finnish Secretary of State (except for Speransky and later Plehve) and that senators were Finns through World War I as well.

The Finns (Leo Mechelin, for example) accepted such a system of common legislation in which Russians took part on their own side of the border and the Finns on their side. Mechelin described this view of common legislation by saying that a proposal had to be carried through the legislative bodies of both countries in turn but without any mixing of those bodies. The Finns opposed any mixing of officials whatsoever and therefore never sent senators to the State Council, as called for by the February Manifesto. The aim of the Finns was parallel, not general, legislation, and the main characteristics of common legislation were separation of legislative bodies and parallel positions on each side.

The Russians tried to console the Finns by arguing that the Manifesto increased the chances for Finnish officials to participate in and control the development of general legislation affecting Finland. Nevertheless, the

Finns simply did not want to participate, preferring instead to separate themselves from general legislation. The Manifesto brought about more detailed definition of the roles of participating bodies and officials, the main change from previous practice. Concomitant with this was the definition of the role of the Diet, which was rather a filling of an existing gap in the system than a real change.

The practice of the years 1809-1899 in common legislation did not match the aims of the Finns. True, there had not been very much mixing of governmental bodies. The Secretary of State, the Governor-General and even some senators had, however, taken part in the preparatory work of the Russian state organs, and they had quite often been consulted there. In its meetings the Finnish Senate had never even seen a Russian minister, only the tsar and the Senate's chair—the Russian Governor-General. There had been Russian-Finnish joint committees, subcommittees, and working teams with two or three members.

One reason for this minimal mixing of state organs was the special system of Russian administration, still very much based on individuals. However, things were changing in this respect at the end of the nineteenth century. Ministers with their chancelleries and the State Council acquired increasing power and prestige, opening Finland to growing demands to take part in the work of these institutions.

Looking at the preparation of common laws for Russia and Finland in 1809-1898, we see that Russian officials had participated to a large extent in Finnish legislation even before 1899, playing the decisive role in many instances.¹³ That a large part of this common legislation was general in nature was due to this dominance and as a consequence this part of Finnish legislation was "local" and subordinated to the Russian. In this respect the February Manifesto was not a major change, but rather a codification of the existing order.

NOTES

- 1 Eino Jutikkala with Kauko Pirinen, *A History of Finland*, rev. ed. (London: Heinemann, 1979), 195-97.
- 2 John H. Wuorinen, *A History of Finland* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), 202-03.
- 3 L. A. Puntila, *The Political History of Finland 1809-1966* (London: Heinemann, 1974), 61.
- 4 C. Leonard Lundin, "Finland," in Edward C. Thaden, ed., *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 421.
- 5 Soveshchanie Velikago Knazia Mikhaila Nikolaevicha (zasedaniia 18 i 29 Ianvaria i 1 Fevralia 1899 g.), published in *Materialy po voprosu o poriadke izdaniia kasaiushchikhsia Finliandii zakonov obshchegosudarstvennago znacheniiia* (St. Petersburg, 1910).
- 6 This theory and interpretation was developed by the main constitutionalist theorist, professor and senator, Leo Mechelin. See, for example, his books *Olika meningar i*

- rysk-finska frågor* (Helsingfors, 1908) and *I frågan om ett närmare ordnande af de rättsliga förhållandena mellan Ryssland och Finland* (Helsingfors, 1909).
- 7 I have tried to prove this thesis in an article in *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, no. 2 (1979), 105-27: "Kejsaren och lantdagen—maktrelationerna, särskilt ur kejsarens synvinkel."
 - 8 This happened, for example, in 1852 during the preparation of the statute, "O poriadke svidetelstvovaniia podlinnosti aktov, sovershaemykh v Tsarstve Polskom i Velikom Kniazhestve Finliandskom i privodimykh v deistvie v Imperii i obratno" (*Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, No. 26,441 [1852]), although the mighty Governor-General, A. S. Menshikov, defended the Finnish Senate's opinion in the State Council.
 - 9 On the preparation of the 1877 money law, see Hugo E. Pipping, *Kultakannan turvissa. Suomen pankki 1878-1914* (Helsinki: Suomen pankki, 1969); see also the Acts of the Secretary of State for Finland, No 1/1877 (hereafter, SSF), in the Finnish State Archives. On the 1878 conscription law, see Olavi Seitkari, *Vuoden 1878 asevelvollisuuslain syntyvaiheet* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1951), with a German summary "Die Entstehungsphasen des Wehrpflichtsgesetzes vom Jahre 1878." On the preparation of 1894 criminal code, see Robert Schweitzer, *Autonomie und Autokratie. Die Stellung des Grossfürstentums Finnland im russischen Reich in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts (1863-1899)* (Giessen: W. Schmitz, 1978), 321-26. On the 1898 law concerning the state secrets, see the Acts of the SSF No. 46/1892 and No. 100/1894.
 - 10 On the 1891 decree, see Schweitzer, 344-45 and the Acts of the SSF, No. 14/1891.
 - 11 Vysochaishee uchrezhdennoe Osoboe Soveshchanie (Oktiabr 1892 g.—Ianvar 1893 g.) dlia razmotreniia vsepoddanneishei zapiski Finliandskago General-Gubernatora po delu o kodifikatsii osnovnykh zakonov Velikago Kniazhestva Finliandskago. Protocols of the Committee are printed in *Materialy otn. do proektov osnovnykh zakonov Velikago Kniazhestva Finliandskago, a takzhe po voprosu o poriadki izdaniia i obnarodovaniia Zakonov, obshchih dlia vsei Imperii, so vklucheniem Velikago Kniazhestva Finliandskago* (St. Petersburg, n.d.). See also Schweitzer, 305-13.
 - 12 The 1910 decree was prepared by the so-called Kharitonov Committee (Senator P. A. Kharitonov). The protocols and acts of the Committee are in *Materialy po zakonu 17. Iiunia 1910 g. o poriadke izdaniia kasaiushchikhsia Finliandii zakonov i postanovlenii obshchegosudarstvennago znachenii* (St. Petersburg, n.d.). A good Finnish study of the subject is Viljo Rasila, "Vuoden 1914 venäläistämishjelman synty," *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja*, No. 1(1966), 1-16.
 - 13 According to my calculations on the basis *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii* and the Statute Book of Finland, there were 204 laws and statutes common to Russia and Finland in the period 1809-1898, published in both law collections. Of these, 65 were Russian fundamental laws and international agreements, which were prepared by Imperial officials, although for trade agreements which also concerned Finland, Finnish officials were often consulted. In the preparation of the remaining 139 laws, Russian officials had decisive power 106 times and Finnish ones 141. (The number of officials having decisive power is greater than the number of laws because the method of calculation did not make it possible to associate a single official with each law. For a number of laws there were two or more officials who had decisive power.) Russian officials also participated in the preparation of laws published only in the Statute Book of Finland. Of twenty-nine laws published in 1809-1898, which materially concerned Russia, Russian officials were consulted in eleven cases.