

**Robert Schweitzer**

**Slutrapport för projektet ”Alexander Armfelts biografi”**

**General remarks**

The project was supported by SLS from January 1, 2008 until December 31, 2010 with an amount of ca. 225.000 €.

Aim of my research project was to continue the biography of Alexander Armfelt (1794-1876) which has been begun by Hans Hirn in two volumes printed in 1939 and 1948, covering Armfelt's youth and his years in service up to the year 1842, when he was nominated Minister State Secretary for Finland, an office he held until his death. The final result should be one or two volumes which would cover his 34 year term of office, when it was his duty to present all matters concerning autonomous Finland to the Tsars - Nicholas I. until 1855 and thereafter Alexander II. The main features of this period mark the progress of Finland's autonomy towards the characteristics of a nucleus state. Thus the biography will be an answer to the question whether Armfelt can be regarded as the architect of the Russo-Finnish consensus which formed the favorable background for Finland's autonomous development.

The grant enabled me to divide my time between periods of studying the scholarly literature and writing the manuscript at my home in Germany and frequent periods of research in Finland – in the National Archive and the National Library in Helsingfors (the Manuscript collection of the latter comprising also the manuscript collection of SLS), and the Manuscript division of Åbo Akademis Bibliotek. I was also able to check archives in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Berlin, which, however did not yield major sources for my subject. On the contrary, my research in the Historical Archive of Estonia in Tartu was very rewarding in regard to sources about Armfelt's rival Governor General Berg. In October 2008 I conducted research in the National Library in St. Petersburg, and in 2010 I used sources in St.Petersburg archives. With the very efficient help of my assistants (Veera Virintie in 2008, Jonas Tana since 2009) I have been able to secure digitized fotos of material, which greatly helped to economize the use of time in the archives.

I had two meetings with the evaluation group for my project, which consisted of Professors Osmo Jussila and Max Engman. Intensive discussions moderated by SLS' Research Coordinator Christer Kuvaja gave me valuable hints, pointed out problems and provided encouragement.

The writing process has been going on since the year 2009 alongside with additional

complementary research. The plan to have finished the book manuscript by 2010, however, has turned out to be too optimistic. The problems which influenced this only partly successful outcome will be treated more detailed below. However, the generous grant by the Svenska litteratursällskapet in Finland, for which I am very grateful, has enabled me to collect an almost complete basis of archival source material and scholarly literature. Footing on this material several chapters and textual elements comprising about 450 pages have been created. As I am on pension beginning with January 1, 2011, I will be able to continue the work. I think that a full first version of the manuscript, comprising about 700 pages, will be completed by the end of 2011. An additional task, however, will be turning this historical expert's documented statement into a narrative meeting the expectations in regard to a biography. I would also try to furnish a number of illustrations which should not only show the people and places involved, but also some documents which illustrate the intricacies of the "paper work" Armfelt did.

### **Philosophy of the study**

When he completed the second volume of his study on Armfelt in 1948, Hans Hirn pointed out the fact that Armfelt, due to his task as a "regional minister", was in touch with practically every aspect of Finland's political, juridical, economic, social, and cultural life. In a way, this discouraged Hirn from carrying on further because there was no sufficient research accomplished in these fields. This situation has improved to a great extent, last not least due to the great publications on the history of Finland's central administrative and political institutions (parliament, central administration, major ministries). On the other hand the whole period of autonomy has undergone a massive re-interpretation, connected with the research of Keijo Korhonen and most of all Osmo Jussila, Matti Klinge and Max Engman. Due to the work of the Committee on the History of Administration we have greatly enhanced knowledge of the administrative as well as the social network surrounding the Minister State Secretary.

Armfelt himself is always present in all these books and studies, but they are never focusing on him. Thus a truly biographical study should have the merit of placing Armfelt at the center of interest. Biographies as such have recovered reputation among historians after decades of a rather sceptical attitude.

The purpose of a biographical study, which supplements the existing literature on single events, social structures, administration processes, and institutions, is to answer two main questions. First

one has to ask to what extent Alexander Armfelt was the architect of Finland's autonomy, and to what extent he only moderated initiatives coming from third actors, whether he welcomed them or tried to modify or even avert them. Secondly, the biographical approach will show to what extent the "personage equipment" of the main actor could at all be a match to the challenges of the time. Armfelt tended to hope that a solution could be found even in seemingly hopeless cases, and was a friend of compromise. But he disliked fighting, and his very same qualities that enabled him to preserve a delicate balance of interests prevented him from really saying "no" if it was necessary.

### **Problems**

The major problems encountered, which tended to slow down my research and the writing process, can be summed up as follows.

Although Armfelt is almost always mentioned in the numerous special studies devoted to Finnish history in the mid-19th century, his appearance remains episodic and his impact on the issues is judged from discontinuous evidence. Thus it is not always possible to correctly assess his role by relying on extant research. But a biographical study necessarily has to take a stand on the question which impact Armfelt himself had in an issue.

Armfelt's papers in the National Archive are one of the most impressive collections of private letters and political documents for personal and semi-official use. Yet they yield comparatively little evidence on Armfelt's personal stand on individual questions or his own general attitude, as there are only few drafts of his own letters preserved, and it is difficult to attribute to him many of the political statements preserved among his papers but written by scribes. The methods to arrive at reliable conclusions under these circumstances are complicated and time consuming. It is e.g. necessary to track down letters of Armfelt in third party collections, which not all are widely known and unexpectedly turn up.

The most serious problem consists of the "addressee orientation" of Armfelt's correspondence. Depending on the degree of trust or coincidence of attitudes Armfelt displayed different views on the same issue towards various correspondents, and he received answers of the same ambiguous kind. This means that often only correspondences between third and fourth persons on the same event make for a corrective of these distortions.

Among the official documents of Armfelt's State Secretary's Office, on the other hand, there is a lot of untapped evidence, which sheds new light on Armfelt's position and his possibilities to influence matters during the official presentation process. It can be procured by meticulously analyzing formal characteristics of the files, which is an intricate, yet indispensable work.

A final obstacle for quicker pace of progress is the situation with the archives in Russia. In order to have pinpointed quests for individual files at hand I scheduled my research trip in the third year, but the finding aids in the St. Petersburg archives are not detailed enough to locate files corresponding to ministerial documents extant in Helsinki. While it was possible to secure an unexpected amount of new evidence from Governor General Menshikov's papers in the Archive of the Military Marine in St. Petersburg, the visit in the St. Petersburg State Historical Archive was not as successful.

Of course I am indebted greatly to the staffs of all source depositories mentioned for their advice. Especially the cooperation by staff and administration of the National Archive in Helsinki was unflinching, even if the cut of the opening hours by 25% from 2009 onwards was a certain setback in their working possibilities.

## **Findings**

Yet even at this stage of progress quite a number of new or more elucidating findings on Alexander Armfelt can be established. The picture of Armfelt had undergone quite a few changes during Finnish history. During the period of autonomy his achievements were recognized, yet he was criticized for having been overcautious, and did not escape the prevalent suspicion that the Minister State Secretaries arbitrarily made use of their possibilities when presenting matters to the Tsars. After independence the merits of Finland-based politicians were stressed, but Armfelt retained the image of a prudent "grey eminence" with best contacts in the Russian capital. After World War II the relevance of personages was generally downplayed, but when the biographical genre gained ground again, more colourful figures like Alexander Armfelt's father Gustav Mauritz and the "villains of the drama", the Governors General, attracted attention. Armfelt was so forgotten that *Suomen kuvalehti* could report on one of his Petersburg-born descendants as an example from the Russian minority in Finland without even identifying her background.

As to Armfelt's years under the rule of Nicholas I it has been maintained that he was under close surveillance by Governor General Menshikov and had practically no operative space, especially when Konstantin Fischer, the chief of Menshikov's St. Petersburg chancery was placed into his

office as his assistant. But it was Armfelt himself who had drawn this picture in order to secure his reputation in Finland after the turn of 1855.

The distorted view of Finnish historiography that a Governor General who wielded influence on everyday politics in Finland was to be regarded as an "unconstitutional" anomaly, has been revised by recent research (Kristiina Kalleinen). But it now even turns out that Armfelt ungrudgingly accepted Menshikov's role and – for good reasons – was even content with Fischer.

The process of securing final approval of measures by the Tsar under Nicholas I has to be viewed differently. Armfelt more often than not could only hand in matters in writing so that he had no chance for discussion, yet on the other hand there is evidence of subtle ways of exerting influence also in this written communication. Of great importance, however, was his possibility of directly communicating with the heir apparent, later Tsar Alexander II, who was chancellor of Helsinki University.

As Armfelt in his convictions was genuinely conservative, it is hard to explain that he achieved all these gains for Finland's "parliamentarization", liberalization, "finnization" and modernization in spite of himself, without suspecting him of overt opportunism. Moreover it is astonishing to what extent he was willing to give up endangered positions, which were then saved by the activities of others (e.g. the customs border towards Russia). This view could even be enhanced by the fact that his letters display his split tongue in contact with contemporaries, and his easy way of changing allies. As a matter of fact, a leading thread in his biography can only be found on a very high level of abstraction.

My conclusion is at this point that Armfelt viewed Finland's autonomy as being in contradiction to the principles of the Russian state. But this was neutralized by the attitude of Russian policy makers not to solve this contradiction abruptly. The main danger would result therefore from a development where the discrepancies between the view of the Russian and the Finnish side grew too much. Therefore he always strove for keeping Russo-Finnish relations in the hands of a few reliable actors on both sides. Harsh reactions from the Russian side could be feared either as a consequence of exaggerated aspirations for Finland's "home rule" or as an answer to simple discontent with the state of affairs in Finland. Therefore Armfelt had to support all efforts to make Finland internally a "viable state". This meant that he had to side with reformers in Finland, too.

The central element of the Russo-Finnish consensus was Armfelt's achievement to keep up an equidistance between the main stream political views in Finland and Russia and to neutralize extreme positions. Armfelt was convinced that setbacks for Finland could be compensated as long as the basic structures remained intact, and that achievements for Finland could not be expected to be permanent. That is why he accepted guidance of public opinion and did not pursue the attempt to fix "constitutional" positions any longer after 1866. But he went along with negotiating gains for Finland's autonomy.

One element of continuity in Armfelt's life which can not at all be overrated is his personal relationship with Tsar Alexander II. Their mutual trust was stronger than the crisis of confidence around 1865, when the Tsar stopped the attempt to codify fundamental laws for Finland, and it flourished also thereafter. Already under Nicholas' I reign Armfelt succeeded to assure Alexander that he would find ways to prevent him from losing his face in difficult decision processes – a kind of support the Tsar did not want to miss.

An element of discontinuity seems to be Armfelt's decisiveness when he worked for the demission of Governors General Berg and Rokasovskii, which contrasts with his loyalty towards Menshikov throughout his tenure and his unfailing solidarity with Adlerberg after 1866. But both acts were not a result of primary antagonism between Armfelt and the other persons involved. As always he only reacted to the increasing discontent which threatened to result from the conduct of both actors. Preventing discontent and protests as a consequence of reediting Finland's cherished law of 1734 also was his motivation to stop the codification of Finland's laws, and not so much the attempt to defend Finland's constitutional positions.

As Armfelt on his place in St.Petersburg had no policy-formulating position, he depended to be furnished with projects and solutions from the Finnish authorities which would be a real remedy for problems and at the same time acceptable for Russia. Therefore, in a way, he had to rely on expertise from the Senate apparatus, but at the same time take care that oppositional views got a say in the preparation of decisions. To ensure this, Armfelt invested great efforts in network building. He had a remarkable capability to employ human resources. He enlisted persons for his purposes, promoted their career and placed them in pivotal positions. But he also kept up intense relations with people whose views he did not necessarily share. As he took upon himself the burden to cooperate with some most unpleasant contemporaries, if this was requested by his duties, he felt also entitled to stand by idly when their fortunes failed.

Otherwise equity seems to have been one of the most important principles for Armfelt. He always tried to find at least partial solutions for the many grievances and calls for help addressed to him. Especially in regard to the University of Helsinki he almost never failed to work out some compensation for people whose original requests had to be turned down.

It might well be that some questions remain open even with the completion of this biography. One is Armfelt's puzzling relations with Casimir von Kothen, who was his friend from their formative years and at the same time can be called the "enfant terrible" of the elite of Finland. Could it be that Armfelt let him loose twice on Finnish educational policy just in order to neutralize him by his failure, or did he genuinely share his ultra-conservative views?

Another riddle is the fact that Armfelt many times announced to withdraw from politics and often displayed resignation and a very low self-esteem. Considering that in reality he clung to his office this could be dismissed as tactics. It has to be stressed that his good working relations with the later Tsar Alexander II as heir apparent and chancellor of Helsinki University made him hope for a brighter future to come when he would be able to work effectively for his country.

But pessimism as such is in line with what we know about Armfelt the man, who was not able to come to a decision in regard to his unhappy marital relations with his second – Russian – wife. Moreover he was grief-ridden by the loss of the three children they had had together, and in constant apprehension about the the happiness of his daughters and the way of life of his only surviving son from his first marriage.

## **Conferences**

There was no plan to organize a conference in the framework of the project itself. This might be feasible upon completion of the manuscript. I did, however, present aspects of the project in the framework of several conferences, and I greatly profited from the ensuing discussions at the following instances:

Conference "Historikern och biografen", December 8, 2008, organized by SLS at Åbo Akademi with my presentation "Ministerstatssekreterare Alexander Armfelt: ett biografiprojekt under arbete"

Conference “Suomalais-venäläinen historiantutkijoiden symposiumi” (Organizers: Renvall-instituutti, Valtioneuvoston kanslian merkkivuositöimikunta ja Suomen Akatemia), Hamina September 17–19, 2009: “In Search of the Russo-Finnish Consensus: Minister State Secretary Alexander Armfelt and his Legacy”

Conference “VIII. Deutsch-finnisches Historikertreffen”, Loviisa Sept. 28-Oct. 3, 2009: „Finnlands Bismarck: erste Überraschungen bei der Arbeit an der Biographie von Ministerstaatssekretär Alexander Armfelt (1842-1876)“

Conference ”2:a årskonferensen / Nätverket för 1800-talsstudier: ’Finland och Ryssland under 1800-talet’”, Helsingfors Febr. 11–12, 2010: ” Alexander Armfelt – a new look?:some new aspects of an emerging biography of the Minister State Secretary”

Conference ”Svenska litteratursällskapet – juhlakiertueella”, April 7, 2010, Turun yliopisto, Humanistinen tiedekunta: ”Just ’Menshikov's secretary’? Alexander Armfelt's position during his early years as Minister State Secretary in St Petersburg”

## **Publications**

Besides the planned monograph on Armfelt mentioned above, the presentation at the Loviisa Conference is scheduled to come out in print in the conference proceedings during the year 2011.

I reported about the project in Källan, the journal of SLS: ”Alexander Armfelt - ministerstatssekreterare in S:t Petersburg”, *Källan* 2010:2, pp. 39-42 (translated by Christer Kuvaja).

Moreover in 2010 appeared the article based on my presentation at the Hamina conference: Robert Schweitzer: “In Search of the Russo-Finnish Consensus: Minister State Secretary Alexander Armfelt and his Legacy”, *Suomi ja Venäjä 1808-1809*, toim. Timo Vihavainen; Andrei N. Saharov. Helsinki 2010, pp. 148-161.