

# Flying national colours in a Grand Duchy under the Imperial double-headed eagle — A short survey of the development of the Finnish colours in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

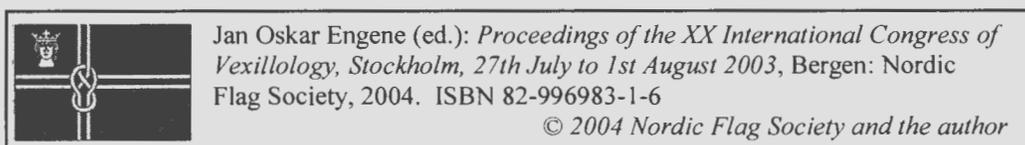
*Tom C. Bergroth*

In September 1809 the Peace Treaty in Hamina (Swedish: Fredrikshamn) ceded Finland to Russia. The Eastern part of the Swedish Realm became a part of Imperial Russia as an autonomous Grand Duchy. For the opening of the Diet in Porvoo (Borgå) on March 28<sup>th</sup> 1809 the czar Alexander I had a mace made in St. Petersburg for the Speaker of the Estate of Nobility, and cloaks and batons for the heralds of the Diet. He also allowed the appearance of the Finnish coat of arms together with the provincial coat of arms to hang in the Church of Porvoo during the ceremonies. To be observed is that the czar was not seated during these ceremonies. The symbolic language plays an important role in transmitting the image of lawful power and order, be it in the cities or in the country at large. The Russian czar wished that the people of Finland should not feel as they had been conquered by a foreign country. He wanted that as much as possible would continue as before.

The first visible signs of a new era was undoubtedly the appearance of Russian uniforms on the streets in all larger cities of the time. The uniforms and colours became a part of daily life. Custom officials and policemen were given new badges, later uniforms, also a visible part of everyday life. But else the County Administrative Boards continued using their county coat of arms as before without any changes or additions. They were however gradually complemented, as the Russian symbol of power was to be introduced. The three crowns on the Swedish coins were replaced by the double-headed eagle, although Swedish monetary units remained current right up to the 1830s.

Merchant ships of Finnish origin had sailed naturally under Swedish flag to 1809. From then onwards and up to as late as 1917 the Finnish merchant ships flew the Russian national flag or merchant flag (Fig. 1), white-blue-red and between 1858-1914 black-orange-white. There were no clear rules so many variations of the flag appeared. Finland never had its own navy so there was only need for one kind of flag.

Flagging on land in Finland is known since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but it seems to have become common only in the late 1880's. The national feelings woken by writers and philosophers like Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Elias Lönnroth and Zacha-



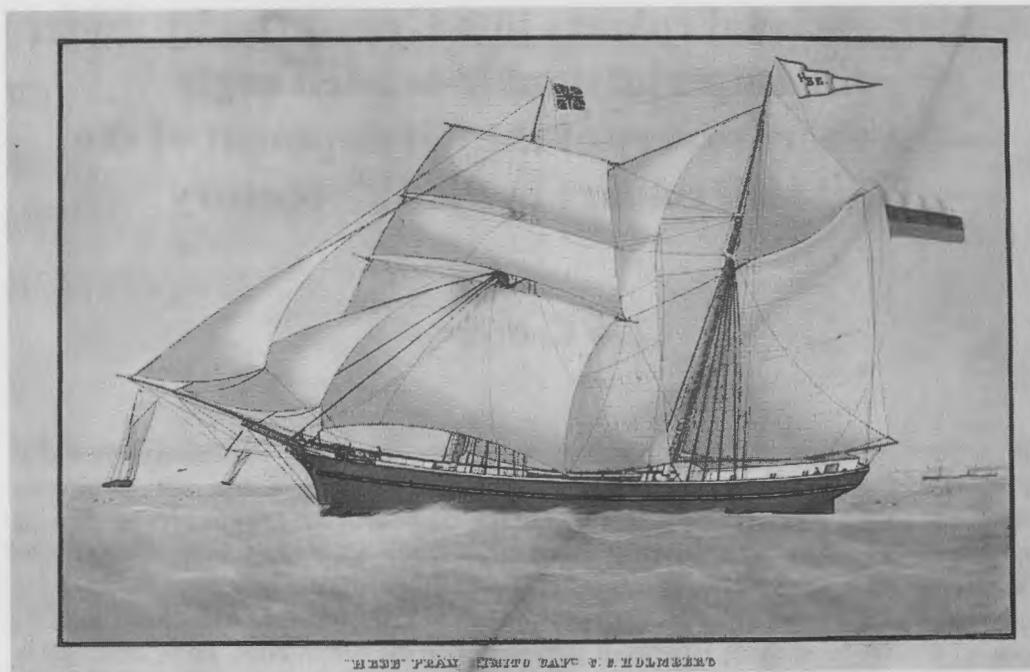


Figure 1 Merchant vessel Hebe of Turku. Watercolour painting (ÅLM inv.no. 19241:4) by unknown artist. Photo Mikael Syrjälä 1987. Turku Provincial Museum.

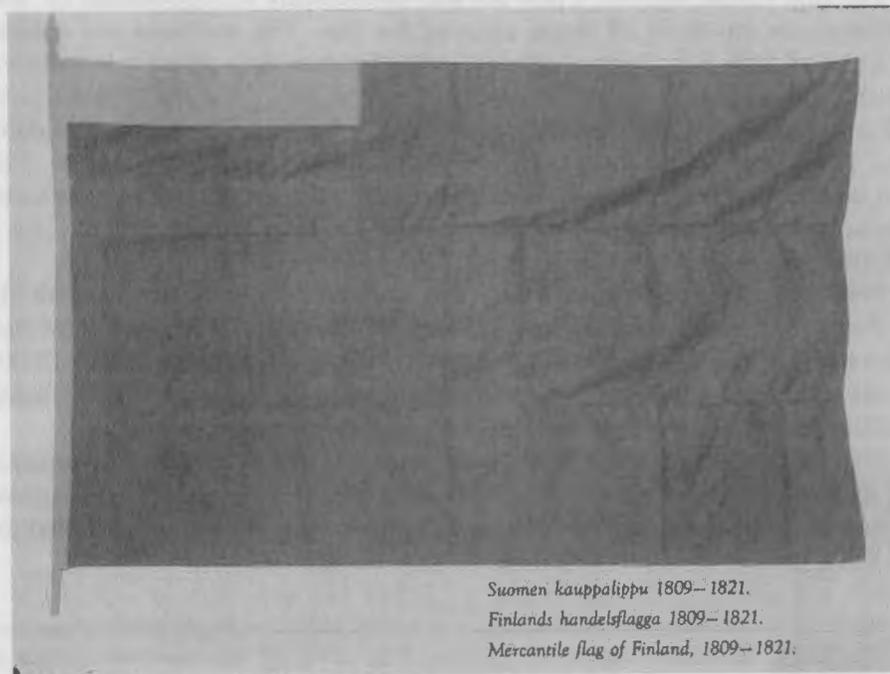
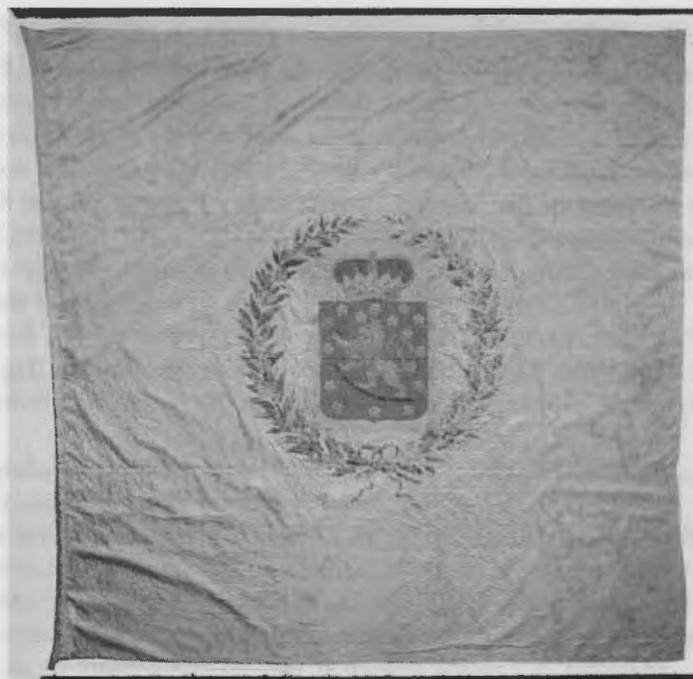


Figure 2 Merchant flag of Finland 1809-21.  
Reproduced from Suomen lippu kautta aikojen.



*Figure 3 The Flag of the Student Union 1848.  
The National Museum of Finland.*

rias Topelius alongside with Johan Wilhelm Snellman's state philosophy had little over for flags but became the ground for a lively discussion in the early 1860's, mainly in the newspapers.

Originally there was not so much the question of an own national flag, a definition at the time rather unknown, merely of a merchant flag to protect the Finnish ships from being taken as Russian! Behind this were of course the Crimean War 1853-56 and the heavy losses that the merchant navy had had. Finland was neutral in this war and its merchant navy, comprising 80% of the Russian tonnage, sustained heavy losses. The joint English-French navies had severely attacked the merchant ships in the coastal waters throughout the war. The mercantile flag of Finland was blue with the white-blue-red flag in the corner, in use between 1809-21 (Fig. 2).

The Russian authorities did not accept the lion flag when used in 1860 and it was strictly forbidden. According to their opinion for the first a flag belonged in principle only to military units, for the second a flag represented an ideal or a movement to which the marching people were united. It has to be remembered that 1848 was the *Revolutionary Year*, a troublesome year in Europe with severe riots in several countries. The same year on May 13th the flag of the Student Union of Helsinki University was used at the Flora Day Festival on the Kumtähti (Gumtäckt) field in Helsinki during which the famous *Maamme* (*Vårt land* = Our country) song was sung for the first time and from then in 1917 became the official Finnish national anthem. The central design was the lion coat of arms of surrounded by a laurel wreath (Fig. 3). This event probably initiated the idea of an own national flag.

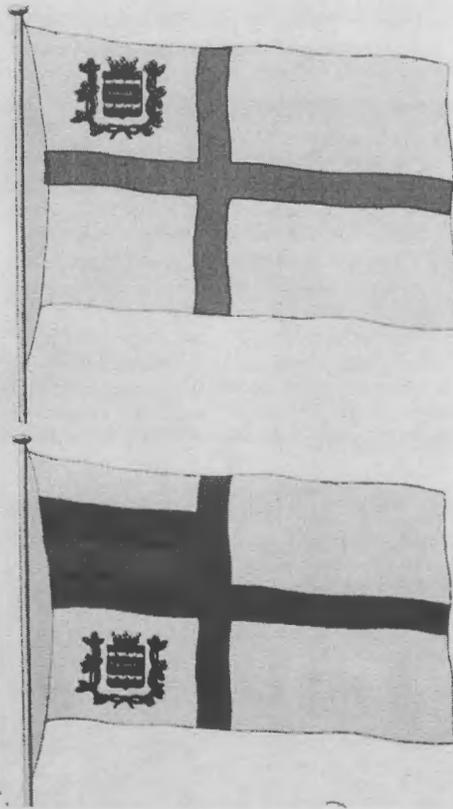
Sailing had been a popular sport in Finland already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first yacht club, that of Pori (Björneborg) was founded in the year 1856. One flag model was however formally confirmed, namely that of the Finnish yacht clubs, the first being the Uusimaa Yacht Club (*Nyländska Jaktklubben*) of Helsinki in 1861. The flag model was white with a blue cross with the club emblem in the upper left field (Fig. 4). It was a variant of the Russian Imperial Navy flag but yet the first officially recognized blue-and-white cross flag in Finland. This caused no problem and the flags became very popular during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, flying from almost every private owned vessel. Nearly thirty Finnish yacht clubs were founded before the turn of the century. The flag model was confirmed again in May 1890 by the Finnish Senate. When after 1918 the white flag with a blue cross became the national flag of Finland a white cross was added into the blue one to difference the yacht flags from the national flag.

It is yet not quite clear who was the 'father' of the blue-and-white flag. It appeared already in 1854 in Topelius' fairytale *Fästningen Finlands värn* (The Defence of the Finnish fortress), illustrated by Emilie Topelius. The idea however had been presented and the white and blue colours had already in 1863 won as the Finnish colours. The innovator was most certainly the famous Finnish poet, professor Zacharias Topelius who compared the white with the winter snow and blue with the lakes. Although at the same time a professor in Finnish history at Helsinki University he never produced any real facts for the choice of colours. The flag of the Finnish contingent participating in a sailing competition in Marstrand in the summer of 1862 used a white and blue flag with the coat of arms of the Grand Duchy in the upper corner (Fig. 5). This reconstruction may not be the correct one as I believe the original flag was without any kind of an emblem due to the short time within it was produced. The first official discussions of a national flag was launched in the Weekly Newspaper *Oulun Wiikko-Sanomat* in March 1862 by Dr. Phil. Fredrik Nylander, who was the first to suggest the creation of a Finnish state flag and a merchant flag.

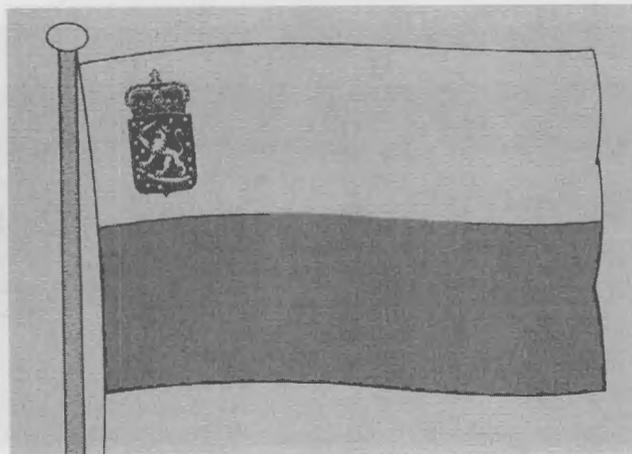
In between has to be mentioned that as a result of the Polish rebellion in 1863 the Finnish immigrants in Stockholm, among them dr. Phil. Johan Jacob Tengström and the director of the Swedish State Archives, dr. Phil. Emil von Qvanten, immediately raised the question in a series of articles of an independent Finland or the return to the Swedish Realm. Their articles were of course known in Finland but not published. In the following year the debate continued and now in the newspapers in Helsinki, receiving lively coverage from the press throughout Finland. Several suggested the red and yellow colours due to the fact that the coat of arms of Finland consisted of a yellow lion in a red field. Many proposals were put forward nearly all of which were based on the cross flag symbolism with its desirable links to the other Nordic countries (Fig. 6). It ended up in two main proposals; the blue and white of Topelius and the red and yellow of the newspaper *Helsingfors Dagblad*. The Diet, which had not been assembled since 1809, was summoned again for the year 1863. Before and under the Diet mainly the daily newspapers of Helsinki discussed the matter and some 25 flag models were produced (Fig. 7). The leading representative of Finland, the Senator Johan Wilhelm Snellman, Chief of the State Finance Committee, thought that there were more important matters to deal with as the legislation. He condemned the plans for a Finnish flag as naive and politically dangerous as he did not want to venture the good means of Emperor Alexander II.

The proposal for an own merchant flag was never raised at the Diet of 1863 al-

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*Figure 4 The Nyland Yacht Clubs flags from 1861-1919. Reproduction from older print with flags. Photo Per Johan Lundsten 2003. Turku Provincial Museum.*



*Figure 5 The flag of the Finnish contingent in Marstrand in 1862. Reconstruction by Olof Eriksson. Reproduced from Suomen lippu kautta aikojen.*

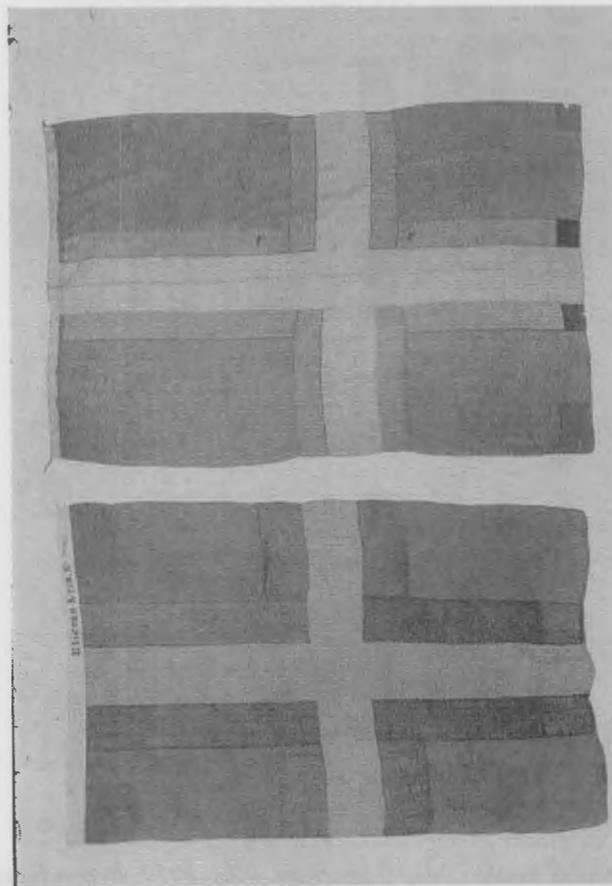


Figure 6 *Flags sewn according to the suggestions by Helsingfors Dagblad (= Helsinki Daily Newspaper) in 1863. Turku Provincial Museum and Satakunta Museum.*

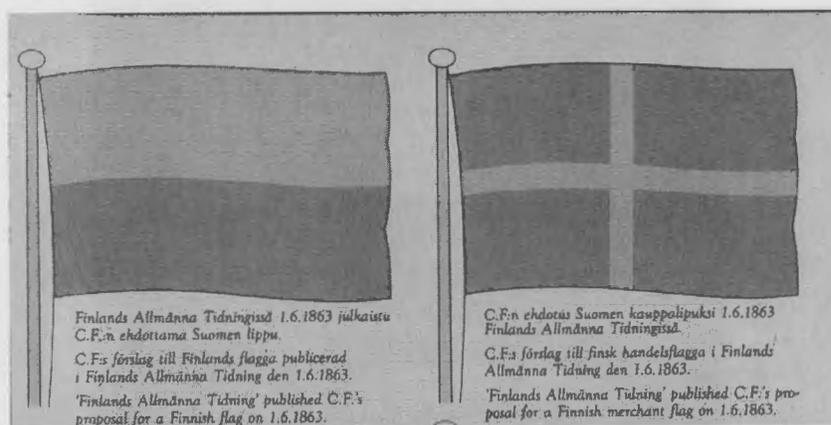


Figure 7 *Carl Fredrik Forsman's proposal for a Finnish flag and a Finnish merchant flag, published in Finlands Allmänna Tidningar 1.6 1863. Reconstructions by Olof Eriksson. Reproduced from Suomen lippu kautta aikojen.*

though the Estate of Burgesses asked for it. The refusal of the Russian Foreign Ministry was the cause. Due to requests from the Estates of Peasants and the Nobility the question was put on the agenda of November 24<sup>th</sup> but was withdrawn by the Speaker of the State of Nobility. The Finnish Estates and, from 1906, the unicameral Parliament assembled regularly until the First World War but the question of a Finnish flag was not taken up by politically authoritative bodies. The Russian merchant flag remained the only officially permitted flag in the Grand Duchy until the eve of independence.

Events as annual song festivals and unveiling of statues were popular for flying colours. The main pavilion of the Helsinki Industrial Exhibition in *Kaivopuisto* (*Brunnsparken*) in 1876 shows the lion flag on the top, the blue and white Marstrand-flag and yellow-red-yellow striped flags. Here only samples from the unveiling of the statue of the poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg in Helsinki in 1885, the unveiling of the statue of the General Governor of Finland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, count Per Brahe in the year 1888 in Turku (Åbo) (Fig. 8). At the Turku Song Festival in 1892 only Russian flags were used (Fig. 9).

In the late 1880's a more hostile attitude seems to have taken over by the Russian authorities. Thus the use of home made flags got a new meaning in a political sense so to say. The so-called lodge-flag made its appearance, often home made and varied considerably: There were lion flags, blue-and-white and red-and-yellow striped flags, and red-and-yellow cross flags (Fig. 10). By the 1890's, in a climate of suppression under Russia, Finland's effort to gain independence strengthened. With the appointment of Nicholas Bobrikov as Governor General of Finland in 1898 the so-called *Years of oppression* began. The autonomous Grand Duchy was to be merely a Russian province among others. This led to that flagging became a means of demonstrating and increased rapidly in the years to come. Now we can speak of a new message: the Fatherland Finland! At this time flags were already machine produced in mass. Every flag produced either privately or industrially was in the eyes of the Russian authorities *finlandskij*, Russian for Finnish. If the Russian gendarmes intervened the owner was usually seen as a patriot and he normally flew shortly afterwards another flag. At this time we can clearly see two kinds of flags, the red and yellow one and, the blue and white one. The former often having the lion from the coat of arms of Finland. This was taken in use among others by the *Svenska Folkpartiet* (The Swedish Liberal Party) and was often used in connection with national festival days and big happenings.

In Denmark and Sweden the national flags were considered belonging to the king and the authorities. In Denmark efforts were made in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to introduce flagging as a common people's right but this was prohibited in 1834 and then again permitted in 1854. In Sweden the national flag were seen as a distinction of the navy, the castles and fortresses and only in the 1870's the Royal Castle and the Parliament began to fly the flag. Yet at the end of the century the national flag was rather unknown in the countryside in Sweden. Both in Sweden and in Finland it is remarkable that the increased use of flags in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in both countries is in some way connected with the summer traditions and thus used as a national manifestation on summer houses (Fig. 11).

The question of the Finnish colours began again in 1895. Professor Zacharias Topelius strongly pointed out that the coat of arms of Finland and the colours of Finland are two quite different things. The dispute on the subject led to an Imperial Declaration of December 21<sup>st</sup> 1896 that "*We hereby declare: Due to an obedient pro-*

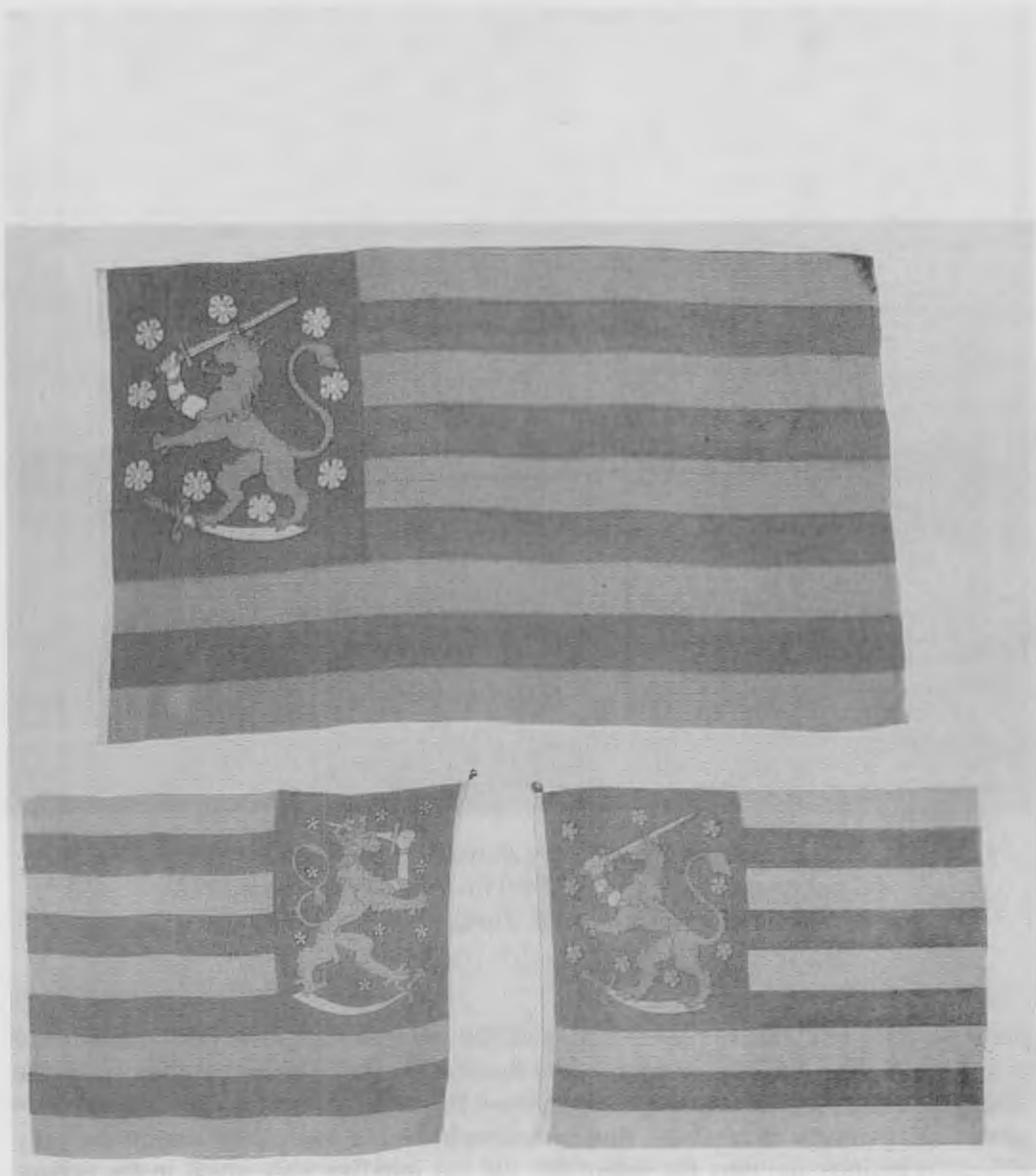


*Figure 8 The unveiling of the Per Brahe statue in Turku in 1888.  
Photo George Nyblin 1888. Turku Provincial Museum.*



*Figure 9 The Turku Song Festival of 1892. Photo K.E. Ståhlberg, Helsinki 1892.  
Turku Provincial Museum.*

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*Figure 10 After the murder of General-Governor Nicholas Bobrikov the lion was added to the striped flags. These were used by private persons as lodge flags but were not permitted at public meetings or other similar occasions. Satakunta Museum, Pori Museum and Turku Provincial Museum.*

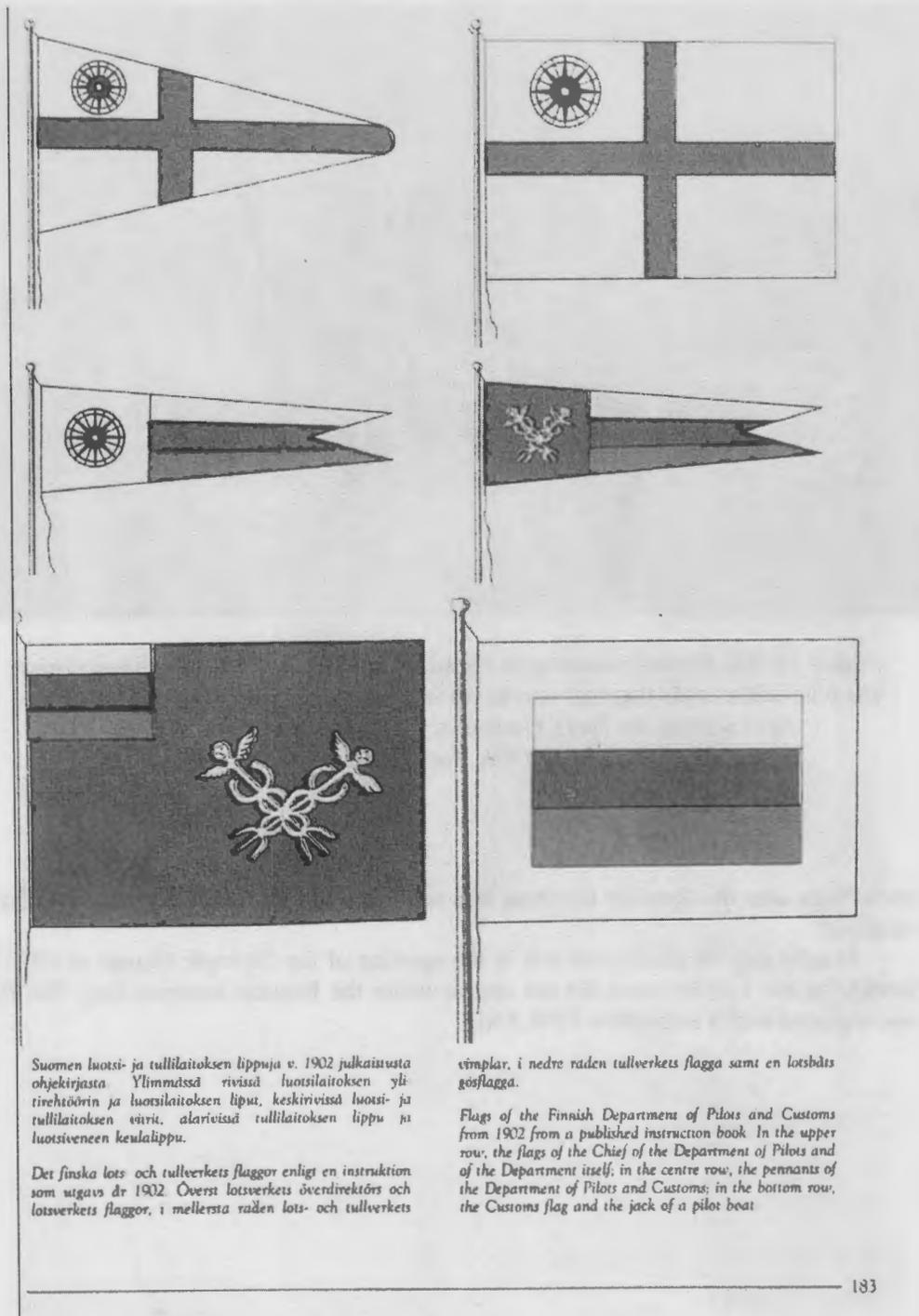


*Figure 11 Villa Solhem on the Island of Ruissalo (parcel no. 38) outside Turku.  
Oil painting (ÅLM inv.no. 15848) by Johan J. Reinberg 1891.  
Photo Martti Puhakka 1978. Turku Provincial Museum.*

*posal We have graciously ordered that at all occasions in the Grand Duchy of Finland is to fly only the white-blue-red flag of the Russian Realm.” This declaration ended the discussions and the lion flag and the Marstrand flag had thus become some kind of resistance flags in the eyes of the Russian authorities. The declaration concerned only official occasions and thus the authorities did not interfere very much in the private flying of national colours (Fig. 12).*

The lion flag and the blue-white cross flag appeared again during the Great Strike of 1905, now as symbols of an independent Finland. The lion flag especially became from this year onwards the symbol of a liberated country. At a meeting in Kupittaa (Kuppis) in Turku on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1905 the blue and white cross flag was carried publicly for the first time (Fig. 13). However after these events they were again forbidden according to the 1896 declaration.

The lion flag slowly became accepted as a formal Finnish flag. This can be seen at the Paris World Exhibition in 1889 when an official Finnish procession banner was used instead of the Russian flag. The first marks of flagging seems to be from about the middle of the 1870's and then on summer houses of private wealthy persons. Whether these can be called 'Finnish flags' is too early to say, merely it was a way to show people that the owner was at home. Many were fantasies. Beside these home-



*Figure 12 Flags of the Finnish Department of Pilots and Customs from an instruction book published in 1902. Flags of the Chiefs of the Department, pennants of the department and the Custom's flag together with the jack of a pilot vessel. Reproduced from Suomen lippu kautta aikojen. Photo Per Johan Lundsten 2003.*



*Figure 13 The Kupittaa meeting in Turku on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1905. On this occasion the blue-white cross flag was carried through the city publicly for the first time.*

*Here seen at the Turku Cathedral from which the march started.*

*Photo J. Schalin 1905. Turku Provincial Museum.*

made flags also the Russian tricolour was used, but not so much as you could have imagined.

Finally may be mentioned that at the opening of the Olympic Games of 1912 in Stockholm the Finnish team did not appear under the Russian national flag. The flag was replaced with a nameplate FINLAND.

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## Archives

Turku Provincial Museum (*Åbo landskapsmuseum*)

Collection of flags and banners

Photographic Archives

## Literature

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Matti Klinge: *Suomen sinivalikoiset värät*, Keuruu, 1981

## About the author



Phil.lic. Tom C. Bergroth is from Finland and has served as curator at Turku Provincial Museum since 1970. Keeper of the Coin and Medal Cabinet and special collections as military and civil uniforms, flags etc. Member of Académie Internationale d'Héraldique and the Finnish State Heraldic Board (National Archive). Studies in heraldic design under the heraldic artist Gustaf von Numers' supervision in 1974-78. Drawn several city and municipal flags and designed corporative flags.

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