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#### EDITORIAL OFFICE

SKS

P.O. Box 259

FI-00171 Helsinki

[tiedekirjat@finlit.fi](mailto:tiedekirjat@finlit.fi)

# The Grand Duchy of Finland

From Princely Power to National Statehood

Edited by

Ilkka Liikanen & Jani Marjanen



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# Preface

Our research on the historical conceptualizations of the Grand Duchy of Finland was carried out amidst two major crises that dramatically uncovered how tightly politics is curtailed by state boundaries and yet, in essence, interlinked globally. For our study of Finland as part of early modern and modern empires this setting had manifold bearings. The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected our everyday work as researchers, restricted our international contacts and forced us to rethink how to implement our comparative research design. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine cut our research cooperation with the European University at St Petersburg and affected more widely on how Finland's historical relations to Russia were portrayed in public discourse. While a reassessment of history is an ever-ongoing process, the wartime political debate proved a challenging, but also thought-provoking context for writing a historical account of how the Grand Duchy of Finland was understood as a political unit in the imperial context and how the different understandings form layers of meaning that are still present.

The project "Grand Duchy of Finland as Political Space: A Conceptual History" was funded by the Research Council of Finland (Decision number 324778). Due to the pandemic, we had to redesign the working modes of our project in many ways. We ended up using biweekly online seminars as the main forum for discussing the chapters of this book. Unexpectedly, the shared responsibility of reading and commenting on the work of one another proved a pleasant working method and helped us to collectively reach many of the findings of this book. Apart from the project meetings, we benefitted from presenting our work at both online and onsite conferences. We would in particular like to thank the participants of the "Conceptualizing the Borderlands of the Russian Empire" conference held in Joensuu in December 2023, as well as friends and colleagues at our respective institutions for support and encouragement. For financial support to our final conference we want to thank the Borders, Mobilities and Cultural Encounters Research Community of the University of Eastern Finland and the Joensuu University Foundation. We would also like to thank Antti Härkönen, Samuel Brander, Jarno Ojala and Ville Ahokas for contributing to the project and producing invaluable material for some of the chapters in this book. Rupert Moreton kindly helped us with English editing. We are also grateful to the suggestions of the anonymous readers who assessed the manuscript for the Finnish Literature Society. It is an honour to have the book included in the series of the Finnish Literature Society.

Ilkka Liikanen and Jani Marjanen



# Changing Historical Conceptualizations of the Grand Duchy of Finland

## An Introduction

ILKKA LIIKANEN

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5793-2720>

JANI MARJANEN

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3085-4862>

The concept of grand duchy stems from archaic forms of princely power that did not separate the concept of the state from the person of the ruler. In the Finnish case its use goes as far back as the sixteenth century. Paradoxically, in nineteenth-century Finland the grand duchy became code for imagining what Finland ought to be as a modern nation state. As a political concept, the Grand Duchy of Finland thus came to refer as much to political horizons of expectation as it did to a legal status codified in official statutes and constitutional documents.

What kind of political entity the Grand Duchy of Finland was, has been discussed since the late nineteenth century primarily in terms of the dispute about Finnish constitutional laws: whether its founding ceremonies in Porvoo in 1809 were orchestrated according to Russian autocratic traditions or the principles of eighteenth-century Swedish constitutional laws.<sup>1</sup> This binary setting – often boiled down to the question of whether Finland was a province or state – has directed attention to conflicting views between Finns and Russians and the related internal political division between constitutionalism and compliance. The focus on questions related to Finland's status has overshadowed the internal dimensions of its 'grand duchy-ness' and largely disregarded its connections with the evolving European discussion on the concept of the state.<sup>2</sup>

In an important sense the concept of grand duchy was at the heart of this transformation. Traditionally, it had been associated with the most antiquated conceptions of statehood, which were not separated from the person of the ruler. During the Napoleonic period, however, it was coupled with emerging ideas of constitutional rule and the modern notion of the territorial state as a political body holding sovereign power in a given territory – and in the most radical visions representing the nation and the people.<sup>3</sup>

In this period, many of the existing names of political units within European empires became uneasy categories for defining political institutions. The number of

1. See Marja Jalava's chapter in this volume. For the frontlines of the historical strife see e.g. Jussila 2007 and Soikkanen 2009, 13–86, Kalleinen 2023 and Rasilainen 2024.

2. Skinner 1989, 3–25.

3. Breuilly 2019, esp. 168–177.

different principalities, duchies, grand duchies, protectorates, and colonies, to only name a few was considerable, but it was unclear how they related to one another and, perhaps even more importantly, how they related to new notions of statehood that were divorced from the person of the ruler. To some extent, this complexity has been lost to us in the present due to a more fixed position the state has in our present day political imaginary. The myriad of expressions was further complicated by the translations of these different units.<sup>4</sup> In this volume we will illustrate briefly the peculiarities of the genealogy of the Swedish *storfurstendöme*, the Finnish *suuriruhtinaskunta* and to a limited degree the Russian *velikoie kniazhestvo* but we are not able to offer a complete analysis of related concepts in different European languages and political cultures. Nevertheless, the richness of expressions and translations is indicative of the complexity of the conceptualization of state at this time and is consequently at the heart of our investigation of the Grand Duchy of Finland.

Ultimately the story of how contemporary actors perceived the Grand Duchy of Finland does not speak only of the conflicting views of Finland's status in the imperial context. The history of Finland as a separate entity called a grand duchy is as much a story of political ambitions, past futures, and forgotten horizons of expectation that Finnish historiography has overlooked. It includes old layers of meaning stemming from the early modern period as well as novel nineteenth-century ideas about what representative forms of government could be in an age of empires and nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Much of the historiography on the matter has either emphasized a long continuity of traditions of princely rule in the Grand Duchy of Finland or stressed the rupture of 1809 as the birth of a modern state.<sup>6</sup> In a sense it would be tempting to write the conceptual history of the Grand Duchy of Finland as a story of transformation from old notions of princely power to the grand duchy as a container in which the nation state could develop. While such a development does take place, we believe both these conceptions should instead be seen as simultaneously present layers of meaning. They were tools in an on-going political struggle of what Finland was to be. Some historical actors chose to emphasize the first meaning while others preferred the latter one, and in most of the rather unreflected everyday discourse it is not entirely clear which aspects are in the fore, making the political use of the notion of grand duchy in itself intriguing.

### *Interpreting lineages of princely power and national statehood*

Despite a wealth of studies on Finland's status within the Swedish and Russian realms, historical research fails to offer a concise picture of the continuity and transformation of the Grand Duchy of Finland's position. Even studies with titles suggesting a focus

4. Gschnitzer, Werner, Schönemann & Koselleck 1978, 304. Storfurstendömet Finland could be translated into Russian, German, English, again to name just a few possibilities, in at least a few different ways. Different names of political units could draw on ideas about certain peoples, certain residence cities or castles or ancestral houses of families, among other things.

5. For layers of meaning see Koselleck 2000, 349–375.

6. For a detailed analysis see Marja Jalava's chapter.

on Finland's status as a grand duchy omit a systematic analysis of the significance of this standing for Finnish state making and nation building.<sup>7</sup>

Studies of Finland's Swedish history have traditionally tended to perceive its status as a grand duchy from the perspective of the shaping of a separate national political entity, whereas the nineteenth-century grand duchy has been examined in the first place in terms of the constitution of an autonomous political unit, a modern state. Since the 1960s the question of the significance of the status of grand duchy has in both cases been pushed more to the margins. Finland's status as a grand duchy during the Swedish era has since been understood in scholarly historiography mainly in terms of a relic stemming from old listings of royal titles that had little value without the existence of a separate political and administrative unit. Concerning the nineteenth century, it has become customary to emphasize that achieving modern statehood was less a consequence of the defence of Finland's constitutional status as a grand duchy than an outcome of the resolute state making and nation building that continued throughout the century.<sup>8</sup>

One dimension of this lack of nuance in understanding Finland's position concerns a simplistic view of the Russian (or Romanov) Empire. While many historians have emphasized the role of an imperial perspective regarding Finnish history<sup>9</sup>, few have adopted a perspective that draws on the new imperial history that focuses on the Russian Empire as a multi-ethnic and diverse body of varying political units.<sup>10</sup> Finnish historiography has tended to present a kind of centre-periphery history, with the key relationship being with the imperial centre, whether in Stockholm or St Petersburg. A new perspective instead emphasizes the cooperation and conflicts that also happen between empires and the 'peripheries' of empire.<sup>11</sup> It involves a comparison of how different parts of the empire were related to the centre, but also requires an understanding of the geopolitical context and how peripheral historical actors conceptualized themselves in relation to other political sub-units.

In recent decades new studies have actualized the question of Finland's status as a grand duchy. Concerning the Swedish period, the view of Finland as a separate entity has been critically reassessed and complemented by uncovering the strategies and motivation of the actors involved.<sup>12</sup> At the same time studies on nineteenth century Finland have re-emphasized the legal foundations of the autonomous status of the grand duchy and challenged the dominant revisionist interpretations concerning

7. For example, Osmo Jussila's comprehensive *Suomen suuriruhtinaskunta 1809–1917* excludes both the analysis of the contemporary Finnish and Russian understandings of the term 'grand duchy' as well as its use elsewhere in Europe (Jussila 2004). (This is surprising, given Jussila's lifelong engagement with the analysis of the concept of constitution, which he initiated in 1969 (Jussila 1969). Similarly, the popular textbook *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State: A Political History of Finland since 1809* (Jussila, Hentilä, & Nevakivi 1999) fails to trace the development highlighted in its title systematically or to summarize this transformation's key features and turning points.

8. See the historiographical reviews in Katajala's and Jalava's chapters in this volume.

9. The best examples are Jussila 2004 and Klinge 1997.

10. Kappeler 2011; see also Engman 2000.

11. For a programmatic statement and important overview see Gibson & Kotenko 2025; cf. Berger & Miller 2015.

12. Katajala 2023; Marjanen 2022; cf. Manninen 2000.

Finland's position.<sup>13</sup> Together, these distinct lines of enquiry have firmly restored Finland's status as a grand duchy to the research agenda. Underlying this remains the old detachment between interpretations of the Swedish- and Russian-era grand duchies, however. The question of breaks and continuities in understanding what being a grand duchy meant remains to be interpreted in the context of the evolving European concept of the state.

To what degree was the grand duchy seen in terms of the medieval conception of the state as inseparable from the person of the ruler and the people as a passive community living under his reign? When and how was the concept of the grand duchy connected with a new understanding of the state as a sovereign territorial body and the people as a society participating in the common government? In the Finnish case there is an obvious need to clarify how these distinct traditions of conceptualizing princely power and national statehood evolved and coexisted. How were they used politically as part of the strategies of the contemporary actors engaged in governing, reforming, or resisting the political system known as the Grand Duchy of Finland?

### *A multi-layered grand duchy*

Each of this volume's chapters has its own theoretical and methodological starting points. Yet their common methodological inspiration draws especially on the tradition of conceptual history, in particular the work of Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner.<sup>14</sup> Skinner's work on the genealogy of the state has been a shared reference point in interpreting changes in European political language. At the heart of his interpretation is the notion of the state as 'a double abstraction' that is gradually separated from both the ruler's person and those ruled. This conceptual shift can be summarized as a transition from a notion of the estates of the ruler ('*estato*') to an apparatus of sovereign rule over a defined territory ('*stato*').<sup>15</sup> Taken literally, the concept of the grand duchy linked the state inseparably to the person of the ruler, but especially since the Napoleonic period it was also given meanings related to the constitutional government of autonomous political entities. Our task is to illuminate how this conceptual change was understood and actively employed as part of the rhetorical strategies of contemporary actors defining the political status and imagining the future of the Grand Duchy of Finland.

The concept Grand Duchy of Finland was employed in full form mainly in official documents and ceremonies and in texts reporting or commenting on them. More seldom was it explicitly used in texts visioning the future of Finland or defining immediate political tasks. Yet new meanings were constantly given to the concept without directly challenging or commenting on its earlier definitions. Finland's special position as a part of the Russian Empire probably restrained its use especially in texts of radical opposition groups. During the nineteenth century Finland's status as grand duchy was not openly attacked as a remnant of the ancient regime, and for most

13. Soikkanen 2009; Rasilainen 2024; cf. Kalleinen 2023.

14. Koselleck 1972; 1979; Skinner 2002; Marjanen & Ihalainen 2025.

15. Skinner 1989; Skinner 2009. See also Pulkkinen 2003.

political groupings it served until the collapse of the empire as an unchallenged frame for different visions and strategies of building the Finnish state.

The main sources vary across the chapters, but a new layer of source material consists of digitized Finnish and Swedish newspaper collections, available printed and digitized Russian and selected European digitized newspapers. We have utilized Finnish, Swedish, and Russian archival sources, and carefully analysed the conceptual choices of previous Finnish historical studies. The new data sources have been used to enlighten the perceptions of the Grand Duchy of Finland among contemporary actors, and to uncover how official political documents were read and used in enhancing or opposing princely power and national statehood. The written sources that we use are predominantly produced by the elites. It is crucial to note that while notions of the grand duchy were held by all members of society, large segments of those voices are not represented in our material. The chapters still capture conceptualizations stemming from different political positions as well as a variety of different elite groupings. We hope that by bringing together different voices from different periods, the volume contributes to a better understanding of the breaks and continuities in Finland's constitution as an administrative and political entity, a separate state and nation.

As this book will show, the meanings given to 'grand duchy' were far from uncontested. This volume's chapters will uncover the breadth of its political use by different groups representing distinct conceptions of state and nation. As an introduction to the chapters studying historical actors' use of the concept, this introductory chapter presents a brief summary of the key official documents and statements that added new layers of meaning to the concept of grand duchy, opening new horizons of expectation for contemporary actors. The introduction is followed by a historiographical analysis on the scholarship that has discussed, sometimes bitterly, the politico-legal status of the Grand Duchy of Finland, by Marja Jalava. Jalava's chapter provides a detailed account of what has been at stake for historians involved in debates on the issue.

It is against this backdrop, the book turns to the early modern period with chapters by Kimmo Katajala and Jenni Merovu. Katajala provides the most up-to-date account of the adoption of the title of grand duke during the time of Sweden's great power. Merovu uncovers the changes in conceptualizing the grand duke and the grand duchy in the period of Swedish consolidation of a unitary state and shows how Finland was routinely presented as a grand duchy, although the Grand Duke of Finland was no longer included in the royal titles of the Swedish monarch. Another, almost self-evident transformation in the notion of the grand duchy took place around the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. With Sweden's loss of remaining Finnish parts of its realm, the political significance of the Grand Duchy of Finland grew. This process is discussed by Jani Marjanen based on Swedish and Finnish sources which relate the grand duchy to fatherland and native land, and by Natalia Potapova based on Russian sources, which illuminate the ways Finland as a divided grand duchy (Russian and Swedish Finland) was perceived in the late eighteenth century and later rethought as a Grand Duchy of Finland after 1809.

The final four chapters in the book discuss nineteenth century conceptualisations of the grand duchy. Ilkka Liikanen's chapter examines perceptions of the grand duchy as a state and nation through the history of reception of Alexander I's speech about

Finland among the rank of nations. Jani Marjanen studies another nineteenth-century phrase, of which one variation goes 'We are not Swedes, we do not want to become Russians, let us be Finns' and relates the notion of grand duchy to the issue of language and ethnicity in the country. Alina Kuusisto further nuances the picture by relating the articulation of regional interests in late nineteenth-century North Karelia to the conceptualization of Finland as a grand duchy. As the notions of Finnish statehood had, at least in Finland, become more established in this period, there was more space for actors to present their own regions as alternative spaces of political identification. Finally, Jussi Kurunmäki's chapter investigates parliamentarism as an argument in debates about political representation in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. In asking how historical actors saw the role of the grand duke in conjunction with political representation in a political system that was archaic to its roots, Kurunmäki returns to the core issue of the very beginning of the story of the Grand Duchy of Finland. Kimmo Katajala shows in his chapter that the Grand Duchy of Finland came about in the sixteenth century as a byproduct of adding the title of the grand duke to the royal titles. Kurunmäki points out that by the time of the end of the Russian Empire, Finnish actors would again turn to the figure of the grand duke, by suggesting that it was questionable if Finland's imperial connection was with Russia or if it was with the grand duke. In 1917 with the grand duke removed, Finland's ties to Russia became even less evident. For sure, Finland's independence from Russia was not a mere byproduct of the adding and removing royal titles, but it seems that the connection to the monarch's person made it easier to conclude that the story of the Grand Duchy of Finland was over and to envision independence.

### *The self-appointed grand duke*

Overviews of Finnish history today regularly avoid exaggerating Finland's status as a grand duchy within the Swedish realm. Instead, historians commonly emphasize that Finland did not form a separate administrative or political entity during the Swedish era.<sup>16</sup> This corresponds indubitably with the fact that Swedish legislation never explicitly defined the Grand Duchy of Finland's constitutional status and only seldom specified it in practice. Considering that Finland's status remained officially largely unstated, it is striking that the concept of the Grand Duchy of Finland was nevertheless constantly used in official documents during the Swedish period and given multiple different meanings in public discussion in changing political conjunctions.

The concept's introduction was certainly a highly exclusive episode, concerning only a narrow circle of the political elite. When King John III adopted the title of Grand Duke of Finland in 1581, the new concept was primarily a tool in the dynastic geopolitics of the day. It was intended to remind Tsar Ivan IV of the Swedish king's power. During the continuous wars that followed the new title can also be read as a symbolic reinforcement of the claim for an area belonging to the Swedish crown, but this geopolitical move did not entail the establishment of a new administrative and political entity. Even less can its main motive be seen as organizing internal power

16. See e.g. Engman 2000; Meinander 2006.

relations within a new territorial political unit.<sup>17</sup> With the experience of the short-lived Duchy of Finland (1556–1563) in mind we can even ask whether by adopting the title of grand duke the king was actually seeking to put an end to the feudal vassal structures the earlier duchy had epitomized. The title of the Grand Duke of Finland was therefore not necessarily intended to create new political structures but actually to promote the constitution of a centralized Swedish state under a single sovereign ruler.

### *The symbolic grand duchy*

In 1583 the new political notion received a further layer of meaning when the coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Finland was unveiled as part of Gustav I's grave monument (Fig. 1). Notwithstanding the fact that Finland did not form a territorially defined administrative structure within the Swedish state, the emblem was thereafter continuously used officially with the coats of arms of the other Swedish provinces.<sup>18</sup> The Grand Duchy of Finland thus also came symbolically to manifest the Swedish king's power internally in relation to his subjects. During the seventeenth century the Grand Duchy of Finland became a much-used concept in Finnish-language royal announcements and proclamations read in all churches. The Proclamations of Days of Prayer signed by the king and announcements of the succession to the throne and deaths and births in the royal family certainly did not clarify the Grand Duchy of Finland's legal status but evidently made it a meaningful concept for the different layers of the population.<sup>19</sup> As Kimmo Katajala concludes, by the beginning of the 1620s at the latest the custom of using the concept of a grand duchy for the Finnish territory had become established practice.<sup>20</sup> Although sporadically mentioned explicitly in official documents, the concept of a grand duchy worked primarily in the traditional sense as a symbolic frame for personal bonds of loyalty between the ruler and his Finnish subjects.

### *The grand duchy as a territorial body*

As is commonly stressed, it was in the most limited sense that the Grand Duchy of Finland had any recognized status in Swedish administration or related constitutional documents. Starting with the first Swedish Instrument of Government (*'Regeringsform'*) of 1632, however, explicit mention was regularly made of the Grand Duchy of Finland. As part of the Swedish system of Courts of Appeal, the Grand Duchy of Finland was indicated as the sphere of activity of the Turku Royal Court of Appeal.<sup>21</sup> Although almost trivial in the constitutional makeup of the system of

17. For related documents and their historical interpretation see Katajala's chapter in this volume.

18. Katajala 2023, 273–298; Katajala in this volume.

19. For the Proclamations of the Days of Prayer and other Finnish language documents mentioning the Grand Duchy of Finland, see the Doria archive collection maintained by the National Library of Finland.

20. See Katajala in this volume.

21. Willgren 1934, 283–291. For the digitized text see <https://arkivkopia.se/bok/runeberg-reggform>.

government, this recognition still credited the Grand Duchy of Finland with an acknowledged official role. Given that the courts of law were the administrative institutions with which ordinary people most often had business, we can conclude that the Grand Duchy of Finland was certainly not an unknown governmental unit for the Swedish king's subjects living on the eastern side of the Gulf of Bothnia.

How much this administrative role promoted an idea of a modern territorially operating state structure and distanced the image of the Grand Duchy of Finland from the person of the ruler is less obvious, however. The Royal Court of Appeal was, after all, based on the ancient idea of submitting the decisions of the lower courts for the king's personal judgment. As an administrative structure, the grand duchy could thus still be viewed in the spirit of the old principles of princely power as a frame of personified relations between the ruler and his subjects.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the governors and field marshals who were later appointed to rule the Grand Duchy of Finland in wartime may also have appeared to the population more as trusted representatives of the king than as modern government officials in charge of an administrative unit. Like the seventeenth-century provincial estate assemblies organized in Finland, Finland's wartime governors served to strengthen ties to the ruler and only to a limited extent to the constitution of the modern territorial administration.<sup>23</sup>

### *The grand duchy of European geopolitics and economic patriotism*

Internationally, Finland's position as a grand duchy was recognized early. Apart from diplomatic correspondence the Grand Duchy of Finland appeared in seventeenth-century maps (see Fig. 5) as a token of the Swedish king's power and glory. During the eighteenth century, geopolitical maps of Europe began to observe the Grand Duchy of Finland as a separate territorial entity from another angle (see Fig. 6). With other fringe areas of empires, it was becoming an object of European dynastic rulers' power games.<sup>24</sup>

Following the peace negotiations after the Great Northern War, Russia pressed the Swedish monarchs to drop 'Grand Duke of Finland' from their official list of titles. The peace treaties of Uusikaupunki (Nystad) in 1721 and Turku (Åbo) in 1743 explicitly mentioned the Grand Duchy of Finland. This meant that its existence and division between Sweden and Russia was recognized by the emerging international law.<sup>25</sup> During the wars of 1740–41 and 1789–91 Russian manifestos and propaganda further promoted the idea of the Grand Duchy of Finland as a separate political entity which, under Russia's protection, was even called to enjoy self-government. These ideas found only limited support in Finland<sup>26</sup> and were refuted by most of the Finnish

22. See Katajala in this volume. It is perhaps in this spirit that Gustav III included this definition in the 1772 Instrument of Government after his coup, which reinforced autocracy in Sweden.

23. Grotenfelt 1916, 1–10; Karonen 1999, 234–239.

24. See Potapova's chapter in this volume.

25. See Merovu'o's chapter in this volume.

26. The few known cases include Major G. M. Sprengtporten, who moved to Russian service in 1786, and some of his fellow officers and members of the gentry of south-eastern Finland. Vainio-Korhonen 2020, 120–125.