A Special Baltic German Understanding about Finland’s Autonomy in the Russian Empire?
Count Fabian Steinheil as the Governor-General of the Grand Duchy of Finland (1810–1823)

Frank Nesemann

Introduction
As soon as the conquest of Finland was under way in 1808, Tsar Alexander I established the post of governor-general, whose role was to head both the military and the civil administration of the territory, also to act as the tsar’s direct representative there. It was not, however, until 1810 that personal and administrative continuity was conferred to the post, through the appointment of the Baltic German Fabian Steinheil as the third governor-general of Finland. Whereas his predecessors—the Finn Göran Magnus Sprengtporten and Mikhail Barclay de Tolly, a Baltic German of Scottish origin—were only in office for some months each, Steinheil would stay in post until 1823. In that year, he was replaced by Arsenii Zakrevskii, the first ethnic Russian to serve as governor-general of Finland. Zakrevskii, who also served as Russia’s minister of war for some years, would remain in charge of Finland until 1831. It was during the terms of office of these two governors-general that the central institutions and instruments of Finnish self-government in the Russian Empire came into being. Both Steinheil and his successor Zakrevskii put their stamp on this process. In this context, most works of historiography dealing with the period in question have viewed Steinheil as someone who fundamentally understood, if not actively fostered, the interests of Finnish self-government. By contrast, Zakrevskii was traditionally labelled as hostile to these interests—as a Russian nationalist thoroughly interested in administrative centralisation. Only in recent historiography has this negative assessment of Zakrevskii’s role in Finland been corrected.

Turning to the traditionally positive image of Steinheil as Finland’s governor-general, it is quite interesting that some historians have regarded his attitude towards Finland to be—at least partly—grounded in his Baltic German origin: “As a Baltic German he could easily understand Finland’s special position”, as the Finnish historian Keijo Korhonen once put it. However, the recent shift towards a more neutral or positive evaluation of Zakrevskii has also called into question the traditional notion that Baltic German functionaries maintained a “general open-mindedness” towards Finnish interests in the Russian Empire.

Although Steinheil was in office for more than a decade, during a period which is generally regarded as crucial for the development of Finland’s autonomy in the Russian Empire, he has all in all remained a relatively secondary figure in historic research. This chapter seeks to shed
light on Steinheil’s role in shaping the evolution of Finnish autonomy and, in this way, to reassess Steinheil’s activities within the context of the special political and administrative relationship between Russia and the Grand Duchy of Finland, which came into being in the years following the conquest of 1808–1809. As its particular focus it takes Steinheil’s views on Finland’s “fundamental laws”—i.e. the country’s constitutional heritage which Alexander I had confirmed at the diet of Porvoo (in Swedish: Borgå) in 1809, albeit in indefinite and vague terms. By comparing Steinheil’s attitude towards Finland’s “fundamental laws” to that of his successor Zakrevskii, the article attempts to arrive at an overall assessment of whether the traditionally prevailing image of Steinheil as governor-general of Finland holds true, or whether it needs to be corrected.  

Dealing with Steinheil as the first influential governor-general of the Grand Duchy, this essay addresses primarily aspects of Finnish history. However, it also intends to point beyond this scope—to some extent at least. As it focuses on the political activities and views of a high-ranking Baltic German official in the tsar’s service, it sheds some light on the imperial management of administrative and legal diversity as well as of different historic and cultural traditions. As such, it might also serve as a contribution to research on an imperial structure in which Baltic Germans traditionally played an important role as loyal executive personnel of the Russian rulers.

Steinheil and the institutions of Finnish self-government

Born in 1762 in the district of Haapsalu (Estonia), Fabian Steinheil made his career in the Russian administration of the province of Viipuri (in Swedish: Viborg)—the so-called “Old Finland”—from the early 1790s on. Having acquired the rank of lieutenant colonel, he served in the province in the years following the Russo-Swedish war of 1788–1790, when the Russian army undertook fortification measures in 1791 and 1792. In the course of his military service in the Viipuri province, he was also in charge of mapping this north western border territory of the empire. As a soldier, he finally rose to the rank of lieutenant general.

Apart from his military career in the province, Steinheil also developed an economic interest in “Old Finland”. In March 1794 he was endowed with the hereditary land donation of Saarela, situated near the city of Viipuri and encompassing 200 souls. Furthermore Steinheil also married the daughter of Nikolai Henrik Engelhardt who had, as a political favourite of Catherine II, once been a very influential governor of the province of Viipuri. In 1812—when he was already in office as governor-general—Steinheil was knighted in Finland, being given the rank of count by the tsar-grand duke. Six years later—in 1818—, he became a member of the Finnish Riddarhuset (House of Nobility).

When Mikhail Barclay de Tolly, the second governor-general, resigned in 1810, Steinheil could certainly be considered one of the best