

The Åland Islands Question: Irredentism and Autonomism in the 'Archipelago of Peace'¹

A Questão das Ilhas Åland: Irredentismo e Autonomismo no 'Arquipélago Da Paz'

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ABSTRACT

Lying in the Baltic sea, at the entrance of the Gulf of Bothnia, 70km from the Finnish coast and 36 km from that of Sweden, the archipelago of Åland is an autonomous Finnish province. What distinguishes the archipelago is its Swedish monolingualism, autonomous government recognized by international treaties, and demilitarization. This article proposes some reflections on the concept of sovereignty in Åland in the 20th century particularly on two key elements the island's strategic position and its autonomy. After a historical overview of Åland in the 1800s, emphasizing their strategic relevance in the Baltic, I will focus on the irredentist period, in which emerged secessionist movement that called for the island's annexation to Sweden.

Keywords: Åland; autonomy; insularity.

RESUMO

Situado no mar Báltico, na entrada do Golfo de Bothnia, a 70 km da costa finlandesa e a 36 km da Suécia, o arquipélago de Åland é uma província finlandesa autônoma. O que caracteriza o arquipélago é o monolinguísmo sueco, o governo autônomo reconhecido por tratados internacionais e sua desmilitarização. Este artigo apresenta uma reflexão sobre o conceito de soberania em Åland no século XX, focando particularmente dois elementos-chave: a posição estratégica da ilha e a sua autonomia. Antes de tudo, vou percorrer a história de Åland no século XIX, com ênfase na relevância estratégica deles no mar Báltico; posteriormente voltarei minha atenção para o período irredentista (1917-1922), no qual surgiu um movimento secessionista que pedia a anexação das ilhas à Suécia.

Palavras-chave: Åland; autonomia; insularidade.

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«We are a people of the sea / the sea is our way / We live together with the sea, thanks to it and as part of it / We know that the sea gives and the sea takes, / that it isolates and connects / the sea is our past and our future / the sea is here and now». This is the poem that dominates the entrance of the Ålands sjöfartsmuseum, the archipelago's main museum, at Mariehamn, true and proper monument to the glorious maritime past of Åland. The location of Åland is perceived by many as fundamental to its insular character. Lying in the Baltic sea, at the entrance of the Gulf of Bothnia, 70km from the Finnish coast and 36 km from that of Sweden, the archipelago of Åland is an autonomous Finnish province. What distinguishes the archipelago is its Swedish monolingualism, autonomous government recognized by international treaties, and demilitarization. As a result of their insularity, Ålanders have developed a strong sense of identity (Holmén, 2014, p. 135-154; Edquist; Holmén, 2015, pp. 143-241) that distinguishes them from the Swedish-speaking Finns of the continent who, contrary to the islanders, have not failed, on a number of occasions, to assert their allegiance to the Finnish state (Daftary, 2000, p. 14-15). The Swedish speaking population in mainland Finland strongly identifies itself with Finland.

This article proposes some reflections on the the concept of sovereignty in Åland in the 20th century, particularly on two key elements: its strategic position and autonomy. After a historical overview of Åland in the 1800s emphasizing their strategic relevance in the Baltic, I will focus on the irredentist period, in which emerged secessionist movement that called for the island's annexation to Sweden. The hypothesis is that the irredentist aspirations took inspiration from a notion of sovereignty (non-sovereignty) that in reality was alien to that of common feeling. Initially, most Ålanders expressed via referendum their will to reunite with the Kingdom of Sweden, as it offered better security than post-Independence Finland could have. They feared that the Swedish language and culture might enjoy less protection than during Russian domination. But as soon as headway was made towards a possible recognition of autonomy by the newborn Finnish state, most Ålanders abandoned the irredentist option. The idea that in reality the annexation to Sweden would have meant the renunciation of sovereignty spread among the islanders: the Ålanders wished, on the contrary, to carve out an autonomous space in an area which – while small – had long been of interest to the great powers due to its location. From the islanders perspective effective sovereignty was not annexation to Sweden – with whom, among other factors, they shared a common language and culture – but rather the recognition of an autonomous status and of a dependable guarantee to protect Swedish language and culture, which they achieved thanks to the intervention of the League of Nations in the early twenties.

My research draws on secondary sources (existing literature on the topic, mainly in English) which has proven useful to reconstruct the historical context, and primary sources such as the diplomatic correspondence and pamphlets – written in the then lingua franca, French, by scholars dealing with the Åland question, mindful of addressing an international audience. As one can easily perceive, these writings strongly reflect the cultural climate of the period in which they were produced and therefore have a propagandistic slant.

THE QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY: “SOVEREIGNTY”, “NON-SOVEREIGNTY”, “IRREDENTISM” AND “AUTONOMY”

We can't treat the Ålanders case and the notion of sovereignty particular to an island without providing a non-exhaustive terminological framework of the terms sovereignty, non-sovereignty, irredentism, and autonomy.

The Ålanders cause was at the centre of not only public but also scientific debate because it represented a model of peaceful resolution of a conflict involving an ethnic minority (Ackrén; Olausson, 2008; Anckar; Bartmann, 2000; Daftary, 2000; Fagerlund, 1993; Suksi, 1995). The terms sovereignty, non-sovereignty, irredentism, and autonomy are interwoven in the archipelago's history and have assumed particular meanings that make this an interesting case study for developing an analysis on the issue of sovereignty in an island context. Returning to the origins of the notion of sovereignty we must refer to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), whose signature brought the Thirty Year War to an end, which by default legitimized the existing governments, settling their territorial disputes, fixing the basic rules which would guide reciprocal relations between states, but above all, stabilized the borders and christened the concept of national sovereignty.

The new order established by the Treaty of Westphalia was founded on respect for sovereignty and national borders and refusal to intervene in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. This new order would be protected by diplomacy permitting a power balance within the community of nations and military strategy which would serve to prevent possible aggressions. As Philip Steinberg points out, the very concept of sovereignty perfectly suited an island viewed as naturally isolated and, ideally, culturally homogeneous. A representation that indeed disregard the cultural divisions within the island – the Irish and Cypriot examples also come to mind – but which have a certain hold on the imagination.

The modern, or Westphalian, ideal of the state as territorially bounded, unambiguously governed by a sole authority and culturally homogeneous is a

profoundly *insular* vision. This vision joins the legal norm of the sovereign, territorial state with the modern ideal of the unified and isolated island. (Steinberg, 2005, p. 255)

Even in the context of sovereignty demands for autonomy can arise within a state, which require a response. Autonomy applies to those states in which rights conferred to ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities do not invalidate unity, territorial integrity, and the sovereignty of the state. The term sovereignty is, however, a word with strong ideological connotations, loaded with expectation for those who appropriate it. This is what Italian jurist Roberto Bin claims when specifying how the term is in itself rather 'dangerous', being devoid of any real meaning.

For this reason, «sovereignty is discussed by Italian comunes, the Lombard League, princes, counts, all those political entities who wish to free themselves from the emperor and have their independence, their sovereignty, recognized» (Bin, 2013, p. 370). It is legitimate to ask if sovereignty and autonomy are similar concepts or to be kept distinct. Autonomy implies the faculty to make one's own laws but at the same time designates a power subordinate to one that is superior, that of the sovereign state. It follows that autonomy means a non-sovereign power, but which, by right, can make judicial rulings. Its jurisdiction is fixed by the sovereign state.

Since Hurst Hannum's pioneering research in 1993, a remarkable number of studies has focused on autonomy, sovereignty and self-determination (Hannum, 1996; Ackrén, 2009; Olausson, 2007; Snyder, 1982; Suksi, 1998). By recognizing autonomy a sovereign state is in a position to preserve the cultural and ethnic variety and at the same time maintain the territorial integrity and unity of the state. One can observe how geographical peculiarity is itself at the genesis of autonomy (islands, former colonies and dependent territories, Netherlands Antilles and New Caledonia, Madeira and Azores, Sicily and Sardinia). Experiences similar to that of the Ålanders can be seen on other islands such as New Caledonia, the Cook Islands, Greenland and the Faroe Islands (Näslund, 2000). A French overseas territory in the Pacific from 1946 to 1999, New Caledonia was granted the status of autonomy by the Agreement of Nouméa in 1999. In the 2018 referendum, held in November, the inhabitants of New Caledonia rejected a bid for independence from France by 56.4% to 43.6%. Today, New Caledonia is an autonomous part of the French Republic. The Cook Islands is a autonomous territory in free association with New Zealand that can manage their internal affairs. Denmark has established specific juridical relation with its two distant islands – the Faroe Islands and Greenland – granting full

internal autonomy to both. The 1948 Home Rule Act recognizes the Faroe Islands as an autonomous community within the Kingdom of Denmark. The Faroe Islands have their own flag, as does the Åland islands. Greenland's internal governmental system has a structure mostly similar to that of the Faroe Islands (Grydehøj, 2019; Foighel, 1981).

We come then to the term "irredentism". This word entered the western political vernacular in 1877, when the Italian republican politician Matteo Renato Imbriani defined as «irredente», that is, pending redemption, the Italian-speaking area under Austrian rule, hoping to be reunited with its fatherland (Manenti-Paci, 2017).

As Ian G. Baird (2016, p. 1) points out, irredentism refers to any position advocating that a nation-state should – on the basis of ethnic, cultural, geographical, or historical connections – annex territory that is controlled by, or is within the national boundaries of, another country.

Irredentism designates therefore the aspiration of an ethnic, linguistic, or religious minority under a sovereign state, to reunite, on the basis of cultural affinity, with another sovereign territory. Those who wave the flag of irredentism make no claim to autonomy since the so-called "union to the fatherland" is in itself a guarantee of cultural protection. Irredentism then brings about a short circuit in how sovereignty is conceived, because an irredentist perspective ascribes absolute value to identity. We can affirm, referring to the Humean acceptance of personal identity, that identity is a product of the imagination. If it is true that we imagine ourselves to be the same person, to have the same identity, it follows that we believe our self to have substantial core. It is the same with the collective identity: to the extent that a collective subject develops a sense of identity, it affirms that there is an "us" that stands in contrast to "others" in contraposition. Following this logic possible demands for autonomy advanced by this territory could not be received. Irredentism, to the extent that it claims union of an territory to a nation on the basis of bonds of identity, embraces a vision of identity; consequently, irredentism can become itself a form of non-sovereignty. Autonomy, rather, shuns the discourse of identity and admits that "we" and the "others" are in a dialogic relationship. In other words, as Italian anthropologist Francesco Remotti states, identity discourse must be substituted by that of recognition: if one creates a discourse not on the basis of identity, but needs and rights, one reasons in concrete and negotiable terms and one will reach an agreement. When discussing the linguistic minority, Remotti notes: one thinks of a linguistic minority that demands recognition of its own language. One will

say: so here is the identity; that language is an element of identity of the community now under consideration. I would respond rather in this way.

One can concede that that community interprets the characteristics of its language as elements of its identity (given the predominance of the myth of identity); but that characteristic is first and foremost an element of differentiation, not of identity, an element for which that community differentiates itself from other communities. The difference is one thing, the identity another: the difference is always a relationship and a comparison to others (we are diverse from B), while identity is the affirmation of our essence, or substance, and enough ($A=A$). The difference is perceptible even with the senses; identity is indeed a fiction (Remotti, 2011, p. 11).

This is precisely what happened to the Ålanders: the logic of recognition has betrayed the claim for autonomy shared by most of the population.

THE ÅLAND ISLANDS: STRATEGIC HEART OF THE BALTIC

Åland's geographical position has made it a place of strategic, above all, military relevance for centuries, as the archipelago could be used as a base for military operations in the north of the Baltic. Both Sweden and Russia, which controlled Finnish territory, had a particular interest in the islands for territorial defence. The invasion of Åland by a hostile state would have directly threatened Stockholm and the east of the country. If the archipelago had fallen into enemy hands, Russia would have feared for St Petersburg and the Russian Baltic fleet (Hannikainen, 1994, p. 615). But in his doctoral thesis of law at the University of Helsinki, the Swedish political liberal Johan Otto Söderhjelm (1928) maintained that until 1809 the Åland islands had had no great relevance to international politics. Two factors contributed to changing the Island's strategic value:

The export of timber from the north of Sweden, that began in this period, followed a route that passed by Åland and touched on one of the supply routes of the British Empire. The construction of the fort of Bomarsund, not on the west side of the island of Åland, in the direction of Sweden, but on the east side [...] demonstrated that Russia understood the real importance of the island, from where it could threaten not only the West but could still dominate the entire Baltic. (Söderhjelm, 1928, p. 323)

Because of their strategic position, the Åland islands became the focal point in the territorial disputes of Sweden, Russia, and subsequently, Finland

(Daftary, 2000, p. 13). At the end of Swedish domination (1157-1809), the archipelago – situated «in the centre of the Swedish lake» (Eriksson, Johansson & Sundback, 2006, p. 9) – became, together with Finland, Russian territory. In the popular imagination of contemporary Ålanders, the period of Russian sovereignty is seen as a rupture between the long periods of Swedish domination and the phase inaugurated by Finland's declaration of independence in 1917 (Chillaud, 2009, p. 19). Finland, including Åland, became a grand duchy with wide autonomy within a Czarist empire, retaining the constitution conceded by Sweden. Åland played a secondary and peripheral role until they joined the Russian empire and become a strategic pawn on the international chessboard. This “peripherality” also features in the inhabitants own self-perception: one could say that only when the archipelago assumed international relevance and no longer functioned as a bridge between Czarist Russia and the more central parts of Europe did claims for autonomy and separation emerge. During Russian domination, the inhabitants made no special claims for autonomy. The Russian empire did not have a repressive policy towards the archipelago, so much so that the Swedish language was preserved. It was only following the construction of the fortress of Bomarsund and the growing military presence that local peasants began worrying about their living conditions. As Pertti Joenniemi observed,

the islands did not aspire to be decolonized and add to their subjectivity; rather, they aspired to shed the particularity imposed upon them and return to their previous existence as an ontologically safe entity, part of Sweden [...] Given that the islands had been integrated, as part of the Grand Duchy of Finland, into imperial Russia in 1809, the question of belonging re-emerged with full force with the demise of Tsarist Russia and Finland gaining independence in 1917. (Joenniemi, 2014, p. 83)

From 1834, Sweden embarked on a route of neutrality, based on a policy of accommodation with the Czarist empire in the Baltic and maintaining a particular stance regarding British interests in the area (Borioni, 2005, p. 11). Annexed to the Russian empire as a buffer state with its own Diet (Klinge, 1994, p. 50), the new political entity created the Grand Duchy of Finland, kept up a solid economic relationship and cultural ties with Sweden. Finland's new territory (ex-Swedish Finland) remained in the Swedish orbit, while contact with Saint Petersburg was rather limited. General governor Zakrevskij called Finland «my Siberia» (Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi, 2004, p. 31). Despite Finland being of strategic importance to Russia for its proximity to Saint Petersburg

(Klinge, 1994, p. 51), they controlled only the eastern part of the archipelago, while the western side was exposed to possible attack (Chillaud, 2009, p. 23). Between 1803 and 1825, the Russian Empire invested large sums to defend its realm: the forts of Brest-Litovsk, Dünaburg and Bobruisk protected the western front, while on the southern boundary the defence of Sevastopol was further reinforced, as was the fort of Kronstadt (*Ibid.*, p. 25) in the Baltic.

In 1830 the work, started in 1812 then interrupted, recommenced on the imposing granite fort at Bomarsund. Bomarsund's location was of strategical importance when Kronstadt, the Russian naval base on the Baltic, became ice-bound and practically unserviceable for many months of the year (Padelford; Andersson, 1939, p. 467). The forts of Bomarsund and Sevastopol would have served as a base for the Czar's fleet charged with «transforming the Baltic and Black Sea into a Russian lake» (Chillaud, 2009, p. 27). The construction of the fortress of Bormasund was a concrete manifestation of the island's new role: that of a strategic outpost within the Russian Empire. On August 15, 1854, during the Crimean war, an anglo-french fleet bombarded the Russian post at Bormasund. The following day, 2000 defenders were arrested, the fort capitulated and was razed to the ground (Weibull, 1996, p. 100); Åland was proclaimed «free under the protection of the Western powers» (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 360). In 1854, a slim volume entitled *Les Îles d'Åland avec une carte et deux gravures*, by L. Léouzon Le Duc was published by the Parisian Librairie L. Hachette, bearing the incipit «Bomarsund has fallen: the Åland islands are under the aegis of the joint forces of France and England. All eyes [...] are, as a result, on this region» (Léouzon Le Duc, 1854, p. 1).

At the outbreak of the war, French General d'Hiller went to Stockholm to offer Åland to Sweden in exchange for assisting the franco-british fleet blockaded at Kronstadt. King Oskar I, fearing Russian reprisal, refused the offer (Padelford; Andersson, 1939, p. 467). At the end of the Crimean war France and Britain invited the Swedish government to occupy the island, but Oskar refused it, not wanting to undermine the neutrality assumed in January 1854. Nonetheless, Sweden continued to pressure the French and British governments to restore the islands or at least render them neutral under the collective protection of France, Great Britain, and Sweden. Great Britain supported the Swedish proposal, France did not (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 360).

During the Congress of Paris, at the end of the war, the allied powers asked Russia not to establish any military or naval bases on the Island (The Fortification of the Åland Islands, 1908, p. 398). As a footnote to the Treaty of Paris, 30 (1856), which sanctioned the end of the war and the defeat of Russia, and signed by France,

Great Britain, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and Prussia, was a convention establishing the demilitarization of Åland:

In the name of almighty God, His Majesty the Emperor of All Russia, His Majesty the Emperor of France, and Her Majesty, the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, desiring the extension to the Baltic Sea of the accord felicitously re-established between them and the East, in such a way as to secure the benefits of a general peace [...] declare that the Åland islands will not be fortified and that no military or naval base will be maintained or created. (Eriksson; Johansson; Sundback, 1995, p. 11)

The convention comprised two articles: in the first, the Czar undertook, at the request of the French and British, to not fortify the island nor construct any naval bases; the second article declared the convention annexed to the peace treaty, as seen in article 33 of the general treaty signed at Paris the same day. It meant that even if Åland passed into other hands the Convention remained valid (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 360). According to Jean Popovici (1923, p. 22-23), Great Britain pressed for the archipelago to not be fortified so as to hinder the construction of a Russian naval base in the Finland sea.

«Great Britain had always known how to reserve for itself maritime areas of greater strategic interest, leading to positive servitude: Gibraltar, Malta, etcetera..., flagrant breaches of international law, knew how to prevent the other powers doing the same» (*Ibid.*). In reality, it came down to a «declaration» which, according to article 33 of the convention, was intended to have the same binding force as the very Convention itself (Padelford; Andersson, 1939, p. 467).

The convention made no reference to neutrality and above all contained no detailed information about the area in which the obligation of demilitarization applied (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 360). The moment that general indications became relative to a terrestrial area, nothing stood in the way of mining the waters of the archipelago. It was also unclear if Russia would be able to exercise the right to defend the islands in case of war (*Ibid.*, 361). The possible construction of fortifications by the Russians in time of war could be justified, starting in 1856, when Russia made a defacto «declaration of intent» in reply to a desire shown by France and Britain, that the terrestrial and maritime area of Åland be demilitarized (Padelford; Andersson, 1939, p. 468).

IRREDENTISM IN ÅLAND : NON-SOVEREIGNTY?

In the course of the First World War, the convention of 1856 remained in force despite the wish of the three committed parties, which had established an alliance in the course of the war (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 366). However, at the start of 1915, fearing that Germany wanted to attack the islands, Russia took defensive measures by fortifying the archipelago. Fortification continued, albeit sporadically, during the course of the war, and by the end Åland became an immense fort (*Ibid.*, p. 362).

In August 1915, German troops launched an attack on Utö, a small island in the eastern reaches of the archipelago (*Ibid.*, p. 362-363). The event caused an outcry in Sweden at the prospect of Swedish action in case of German occupation of the Island (*Ibid.*, p. 363). In an article entitled *La Suède et la guerre* and published in “Le Figaro” on August 11, 1915, Swedish pro-entente publicist Erik Valentin Sjoestedt, argued for ceding the archipelago to Sweden as part of a rapprochement between Russia and Sweden against Germany (Chillaud, 2009, p. 54).

Following the war, Åland was at the centre of a territorial dispute between Sweden and Finland. During the conflict, the Scandinavian press called for restituting of the archipelago to Sweden, claiming a parallel between Åland’s situation and that of Schleswig or Alsace-Lorraine (Denier, 1919, p. 10). As Jean Denier, pseudonym of Raymond Migeot, stated: «Åland irredentism never really developed until the world war; it could be said that it was born because of the war» (*Ibid.*, p. 13).

When in 1917 civil war in Russia broke out, the Russians troops stationed on the islands tainted their reputation with grave abuses against the local peasants (Padelford; Andersson, 1939, p. 469). On August 20, a group of islanders representing the «people of Åland» met in a popular high school (Folkhögskola) at Finström and adopted unanimously a resolution stating their desire to be reunited to Sweden. These representatives of the «people of Åland» were peasant men without high levels of education who claimed to express the interests of all the population.

They placed their hopes in Julius Sundblom and Carl Björkman, district prosecutors for the Swedish-speaking community of Finland, who appointed themselves interpreters of islanders’ aspirations (Eriksson; Johansson; Sundback, 2006, p. 82).

The islanders movement harked back to the romantic national Scandinavian movement, which in turn, was inspired by German cultural nationalism. Language was considered the source of the nation’s spirit just as

nature and climatic conditions were considered to be the factors of significant impact on the formation of national character and temperament of the people (*Ibid.*, p. 86). Åland's Swedish-speaking youth movement, influenced by national Scandinavian movements, organized musical festivals in the islands – known as bygdesvenskhet – (*Ibid.*, p. 86-88).

Following the proclamation of the Soviet Republic on November 7, 1917, and the declaration on the rights of nationalities to take care of their own affairs, the hopes of the Ålanders grew that their request would find fertile terrain. However, no action was taken. A pamphlet printed in Helsinki in June 1920 underlined that before the war, the same leaders of the separatist movement expressed no desire to separate from Finland (*The Åland Question*, 1920, p. 4). It was acknowledged that Sundblom had considered the Ålanders as belonging to the «Swedish race» of Finland, considered as the common homeland of the Finnish and the Swedish (Hermanson, 1921, p. 82). At a youth rally at Mariehamn on June 22, 1898, Sundblom explained:

We must cultivate the legacy of our fathers. We must give our best for the Fatherland whose legacy they bequeathed; we must work with alacrity for the native soil which we are entitled to consider our own [...] *Swedish and Finnish* fighting side by side when the struggle was fierce and heroic blood reddened the snow. There was only one homeland, one people. This is true today and will be so for eternity. Providence has judged well, in its wisdom, to place side by side in this country two groups with different tongues. United in working for the possession of the fatherland [...] *The Swedish race in Finland is one*, even though it is scattered over many hundreds of miles of coastline, our objective is common. (*Ibid.*, p. 82-83)

In another speech at Turku on June 17, 1906, at a choral performance, Sundblom reaffirmed the need for a common front – Ålanders and Swedish-speakers of Finland – because «united is the fatherland, the land of our fathers and our sons, so dear and precious to each of us, whatever the language or social position» (*Ibid.*, p. 83). On June 28, 1908, Sundblom, guest at a musical festival, reiterated yet again the shared goals of the Finnish and Swedish-speakers of Finland, rejecting the accusation that the Swedish-speakers, including the Ålanders «lacked patriotic sentiment, because we retain our special character and safeguard our mother tongue as the most precious thing we possess after the fatherland, our most prized legacy» (*Ibid.*, p. 84).

Sundblom's declarations between 1898 and 1908 reveal how the the concept of sovereignty implied achieving a cultural autonomy shared with the Swedish-speakers of Finland.

Most of the Åland population shared this position: what really mattered to the islanders was to preserve the Swedish language.

The idea of annexation emerged in 1917, when life conditions in Sweden were decisively better than in Finland. Terrorized by the brutality of the Russian soldiers and the Bolshevik regime in Finland, it made sense for the islanders to renounce sovereignty for an annexation that would have conferred a measure of protection against international interference. On December 4, 1917, Finland proclaimed itself an independent sovereign state and on the 31st was recognized by the Bolshevik government (Padelford; Andersson, 1939, p. 469).

Soviet Union's declaration recognizing Finland contained no mention of the Grand Duchy of Finland. If, on the contrary, the line of continuity between the Grand Duchy and the new Finnish state had been made explicit, it would have been possible to affirm with absolute certainty that the archipelago now came under Finland's authority. The Finnish declaration of independence thus raised again the question of the demilitarization of Åland. This posed the problem of compliance by the new state with the treaties concluded with Russia before independence.

Finland assumed a fairly clear position and took a resolute approach to the issue, opposing a simple refusal to recognize the obligations deriving from the 1856 convention. In turn, the Swedes observed that such obligations constituted a constraint that remained even when the territory became part of another state (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 366).

The Åland secessionists started to mobilize in favour of secession from Finland and for union with Sweden in August 1917, four months before the Finnish declaration of independence (Stanbridge, 2002, p. 534). Several scholars have observed that separatist sentiment and that of union with Sweden predated 1917. Karen Stanbridge notes, however, that the lack of public opinion hostile to Finland suggests that protests, that took place in the post-war period, need be understood within the context of an Europe characterized by a vast cycle of agitation accompanied by the emergence of the principle of self-determination, the so-called «self-determination master frame» (*Ibid.*, p. 535).

On February 3rd, 1918, an Åland delegation arrived in Stockholm to deliver to the Swedish king Gustav V, a petition signed by 7135 islanders bearing the date of December 31st, 1917, requesting annexation to Sweden (Gregory, 1923, p. 67). The islanders presented two unofficial petitions – the first of December 1917, when Finland became independent and then of June 1919 – in which most island-

ers declared themselves in favour of re-union (Daftary, 2000, p. 19). The islanders feared that Finland's independence and the possibility of a socialist government could jeopardize the Swedish language and culture of the archipelago.

This concern was not shared by most Finnish Swedish-speakers who lived on mainland (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 358), having vastly different expectations: rather than aspire to reunion with Sweden, they sought to acquire power within a Finnish majority state (Stanbridge, 2002, p. 544). At the end of the civil war, most of the population of the archipelago indicated intent to become incorporated into Swedish territory. In spring 1919, without consulting the Finnish government, on the occasion of the Paris Peace Conference, the Åland representatives launched an appeal asking that the resolution of the Åland question by referendum be added.

Sweden supported their request, putting forward history and language as motivating reasons and declaring that there was no historical foundation for the archipelago to belong to Finland (Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi, 2004, p. 135). The Swedish leaders were convinced that the arguments in favour of self-determination would have a considerable part to play in the peace Conference, believing that if the Åland question should be examined by the allied powers, the islands would certainly return to Swedish sovereignty (Stanbridge, 2002, p. 536).

On February 12, 1919, in another meeting with the representatives at the Paris Peace Conference, the islanders reaffirmed that the separatist movement drew inspiration from Wilson's Fourteen Points (*Ibid.*). During the first phase of negotiations, the great powers showed themselves well-disposed towards the Åland separatists. Francesco Tommasini, Italian Minister at Stockholm, who declared a thorough knowledge of the matter, was particularly sensitive to the islanders' cause, seeing numerous similarities with the irredentist lands.

The Swedish claims to the Åland islands are based on such solid historical and ethnographic grounds that it seems impossible that Italy, which has based all its war policy on the same foundation, could refuse at least a show of platonic sympathy; such a show, could be accompanied by a reserve justified by the desire to proceed with caution with the allies and for the necessity to resolve the Åland question so as not to step on the toes of Finland, and in the interests of a good relationship between Finland and Sweden. Such an approach does not seem to me to present any difficulties and would make a good impression here where public opinion is favourable to annexation. I know the Åland question in detail, having spoken at length with Mannerheim and all the prominent Swedish figures and would deem it opportune that V. E, before taking any position on the matter, permit me to brief him. (*I documenti diplomatici italiani*, 1919, p. 404)

The portrayal of the Åland question in the press reflected the allies prevalent trend of wanting to hold up the case of the islanders as a defence of the principle of moral, if not political, self-determination (Stanbridge, 2002, p. 539).

The Paris Peace Conference deemed it necessary to submit the Åland question to examination by the League of Nations. On May 6, 1920, the Finnish parliament intended to meet the islanders' demands, proposing a law giving Åland its own regional Council and special rights in consideration of their special status (Jussila; Hentilä; Nevakivi, 2004, p. 135). This «home rule act» conceded to Åland displeased the irredentist leaders who, referring to the principle of self-determination, turned to the Swedish government, to the king of Sweden, and to international representatives at Stockholm, to express again their desire to reunite with the Swedish motherland (Stanbridge, 2002, p. 542).

Besides recognition of a regional Council with legislative powers, the law on self-government reserved competence on some matters to the national assembly in Helsinki. Once freedom of movement, choice of residence, and private and patrimonial rights remained under the control of the central state, such a status would not, in any case, have conferred to Ålanders the option of putting a stop to Finnish immigration (Williams, 2009, p. 98).

After rejecting the proposal, the Åland leaders announced their intention to convene a national assembly of the archipelago to take an official position on separation from Finland. Swedish officials supported *in toto* the islanders' requests, exploiting the provocative separatist declarations to induce the representatives of the Allied Powers to intervene resolutely. On June 19, 1920, the Åland question was brought before the League of Nations as a question of international relations.

After consulting the representatives of Finland, Sweden, and Åland, and having reached a consensus a commission of enquiry composed of three international jurists was set up to look into the matter (Gregory, 1923, p. 64). The members of the commission were called upon to produce as quickly as possible a verdict on the matter of international obligations concerning demilitarization and to evaluate, with reference to paragraph 8 of article 15 of the Convention, if the Åland case came under Finnish jurisdiction or if it was necessary to fall back on international law.

The commission verified above all that the question was not strictly within Finnish competence and that the peace treaty of March 30, 1856, was still valid regarding the demilitarization status of the archipelago (*Ibid.*). According to the commission, the 1856 Convention should remain in force to safeguard «european interests» (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 366). To justify the decision of assigning the League of Nations the task of giving a definitive verdict, the commission of jurists pointed out that the matter had been raised before Finland became

an independent state. As such, the matter could not be treated as a Finnish «internal matter» (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 366-367).

Finland accepted that the League of Nations should rule on the issue (Gregory, 1923, p. 64). On September 20, 1920, the commission drafted a report in which the League of Nations declared itself competent to intervene (Rotkirch, 1986, p. 367). After resolving the legal questions, the knotty political issues remained. For this, the League of Nations set up a commission of experts to examine the question to give useful indications on how to maintain peace in this area. The commission backed the jurists' opinion regarding the competence of the League of Nations to intervene on the matter.

On September 5, 1920, the commission ruled on the merits of the Åland case, declaring on the matter of the right to self-determination that, in the interests of peace, a compromise that gave ample liberty to the minorities would be preferable. On the matter of demilitarization of the archipelago, the commission upheld the validity of the 1856 peace treaty (Brown, 1921, p. 271).

On examining the legal, historical, strategic, and geographical aspects and having listened to the Swedish, Finnish, and Åland representatives, the commission drafted a report dated April 16, 1921, in which they declared with absolute certainty that Åland belonged to Finland and that as such the request to reunite with Sweden was quite illegitimate (Gregory, 1923, p. 65). The commission judged it appropriate that the Swedish language be protected and that in primary schools and technical Swedish be the sole language of instruction. On June 27, the League of Nations Council established a series of guarantees protecting the culture of the archipelago, which were incorporated into Finnish law on August 11, 1922, as a guarantee (Daftary, 2000, p. 20).

CONCLUSION

The decision taken by the League of Nations was received with bitterness by the Swedes and for a brief period upset relations, «otherwise excellent», between Sweden and Finland (Weibull, 1996, p. 124). In international circles, the decision was, on the contrary, greeted favorably for it introduced a peaceful way of regulating conflicts involving national minorities. The first plenary session of the Landsting, the first Åland parliament, took place on June 9, 1922 (Eriksson; Johansson; Sundback, 1995, p. 37).²

Julius Sundblom, leader of the irredentist movement, was nominated Speaker of Parliament and concluded his speech by paying tribute to autonomy and peaceful relations with Finland. Certainly, there were occasions on which

the islanders held on to and emphasized their distinct character in relation to the Finnish Swedish-speakers, such as the musical and choral that took place during the 1922 midsummer festival.

The islanders sang *Ålänningens* for the first time (Eriksson, Johansson & Sundback, 2006, p. 91), a song for Åland composed by John Grandell, and refused to conclude with the Finnish anthem “Maamme”. They waved their, then unofficial, blue, yellow, blue flag (Eriksson, Johansson & Sundback, 1995, p. 62). The final verse of *Ålänningens* eulogized the Swedish language, with no explicit reference to the Swedish spoken in Sweden or Finland (*Ibid.*).

Nonetheless, all this revealed how the notion of sovereignty was fundamentally linked to that of autonomy, as opposed to annexation, which was a testament to non-sovereignty. As Barbro Sundback points out, one among a panorama of Åland representatives, the islanders’ self-image changed over time. In the popular imagination in the middle of the last century, they saw themselves as victims of a cruel destiny that had put the archipelago in the hands of foreign powers.

Gaining autonomy modified this perception, giving the islanders an active role in the battle for island sovereignty, with the effect that the islanders would increasingly trust in their capacity to meet the interests and needs of their population through democratic and peaceful means (Eriksson, Johansson & Sundback, 1995, p. 59). In the popular imagination, the islanders were a distinct group of people, different from all others, be they Finnish, Swedish, or the Finnish Swedish-speakers (*Ibid.*, p. 72). Identity is not something immutable. Over time, the Ålandic identity has evolved, and today many Ålanders describe themselves as Europeans, Nordic, Finlanders and Ålanders.

The peaceful arbitration of the Åland question – made possible by the pre-eminence given to international law – constituted a precedent of undoubted relevance, representing a new model of solving conflicts on the sovereignty of part of a territory held within a national state. It was, in fact, one of the first disputes between states in the years immediately after World War One and preceded the establishment of the permanent International Court of Justice.

On June 9, 1982, Mauno Koivisto, the newly-elected president of the Finnish Republic, invited as guest of honour to the 70th anniversary celebration of autonomy, placed great value on the close relationship between the Finnish state and the archipelago, based on the principle of consensus in matters of autonomy (Johansson, 1984, p. 38). In 1997, the then-Finnish president Martti Oiva Kalevi Ahtisaari, spoke several times of the political consensus that distinguished relations between the Åland islands and Finland following World War Two. In a speech, he expressed the hope that Finland would continue to

promote the autonomy of Åland on the basis of consensus and mutual respect (Eriksson; Johansson; Sundback, 2006, p. 74).

Going back to Pertti Joenniemi's words, which sum up well the situation of Åland as a 'land in-between' (Joenniemi, 2014, p. 87), we can say that «the islands have actually become accustomed to being 'partly in, partly out', both regarding Finland and Sweden but also more generally in relation to the standard categories and concepts applied in organizing political space (Ibid., p. 93)». Sovereignty, non-sovereignty, irredentism, and autonomy must consider this insular peculiarity.

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NOTAS

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² The 9th June is a national festival day celebrated each year in honor of the day of autonomy for Åland. The 30th of March is the day for celebrating the demilitarization of 30th March 1856, which, like the day of autonomy is for flying the official flags.

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Na página 13

onde se lia:

The Åland Islands Question: Irredentism and Autonomism in the ‘Archipelago of Peace’
A Questão das Ilhas Åland: Irredentismo e Autonomismo no ‘Arquipélago Da Paz’

Leia-se:

The Åland Islands Question: Irredentism and Autonomism in the ‘Archipelago of Peace’¹
A Questão das Ilhas Åland: Irredentismo e Autonomismo no ‘Arquipélago Da Paz’

Na página 27

onde se lia:

The decision taken by the League of Nations was received with bitterness by the Swedes and for a brief period upset relations, «otherwise excellent», between Sweden and Finland (Weibull, 1996, p. 124). In international circles, the decision was, on the contrary, greeted favourably for it introduced a peaceful way of regulating conflicts involving national minorities. The first plenary session of the Landsting, the first Åland parliament, took place on June 9, 1922 (Eriksson; Johansson; Sundback, 1995, p. 37).¹

Leia-se:

The decision taken by the League of Nations was received with bitterness by the Swedes and for a brief period upset relations, «otherwise excellent», between Sweden and Finland (Weibull, 1996, p. 124). In international circles, the decision was, on the contrary, greeted favorably for it introduced a peaceful way of regulating conflicts involving national minorities. The first plenary session of the Landsting, the first Åland parliament, took place on June 9, 1922 (Eriksson; Johansson; Sundback, 1995, p. 37).²

Na página 31

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