

The French Perspective on the Åland Islands:
A Cyclic Interest?
Between Geopolitics, Historiography, and a Case Study

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Abstract

Combining historical depth and political analysis, this article examines the way that France has perceived the strategic role of the Åland Islands, as well as the French role in the construction of their status of demilitarisation and neutralisation. For that, we strove to draw a parallel between, on the one hand, the intensity of French activities in the Baltic Sea in general and on the Åland Islands in particular, and, on the other hand, the amount of literature in social sciences and the humanities that examines the Åland Islands. This exercise substantiates the hypothesis that whilst this region used to be quite well known in France, nowadays this is no longer the case. It is bound to change, as the majority of the riparian States of the Baltic Sea and France belong henceforth to the same security and defence organisations, namely the EU and NATO. Subsequently, France cannot be indifferent to an area in which she has to assume her historical role, so far almost consigned to oblivion.

Keywords

Åland Islands, France, French foreign policy, Historiography

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1. Introduction

During Emmanuel Macron's presidential visit in Helsinki in August 2018, a Franco-Finnish statement on European defence¹ was adopted with nonetheless no mention on the special status of demilitarisation and neutralisation of the Åland Islands. Even the French media kept quiet the issue. Was it excessively anecdotal for not being considered as a significant issue? Yet, the Åland Islands used to be important in the French political agenda to such an extent that France has bluntly left her marks on the collective psyche of the islands. The first feeling, which emerges after a quick scrutiny through French literature in the humanities and social sciences that examines the Åland Islands, confirms this curious situation. Whereas numerous articles and books were penned by the French during the interwar period, and even to a certain extent before, nowadays very few of those in France express an interest in the Åland Islands. Indeed, in French newspapers, it is possible, at odd occasions, to find articles about the Åland Islands: for instance, the Åland Islands as a model for Corsica², the Åland Islands being able to impede the adoption of the treaty of Lisbon³, and the Åland Islands as the place where some old champagne was found from a shipwreck.⁴ Nonetheless, the topic, is not really familiar for French public.

This apparent paradox should be explained through closer examination. By analysing in historical depth the Åland Islands in the French political-strategic agenda, this article aims precisely to put in perspective the situation of a southern country that has genuinely influenced the destiny of these islands. In order to validate our hypothesis, we shall conduct a geopolitical and historiographical exercise with a case study. Firstly, we shall assess the intensity of the literature in human and social sciences that examines the Åland Islands through the French geopolitical perspective of the area. Then we will discuss the interest of France in the Åland Islands with their quality of 'outermost Baltic power' according to geopolitical and historiographical considerations. Finally, we shall analyse the impact of the 'Åland factor' in the French foreign policy by focusing our study to the period between the Crimean War and the conclusion of the 1921 Convention on the Non-Fortification and Neutralisation of the Åland Islands.

1 Visite d'Emmanuel Macron en Finlande (29-30 August 2018), *Déclaration franco-finlandaise sur la défense européenne*(https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/18-08-23_declaration_fr-fi_sur_la_defense_europeenne_version_fr_cle88cdff.pdf).

2 *La Tribune* 2005.

3 *Le Monde* 2008.

4 *Le Monde* 2015.

2. The French interest in the Åland Islands: a geopolitical and historiographical perspective

For obvious geostrategic considerations, securing possession of the Åland Islands has always been a common denominator of all the countries which have sovereignty over them. Dominating the entrance of the Gulf of Bothnia, these islands are particularly well-adapted for hosting a strong military base that would dominate the geostrategic approach generally to the Baltic Sea, and particularly to Sweden, Finland, and Russia. As French allies and enemies have always been riparian States of the Baltic Sea for more than two centuries, the Åland Islands have continuously been of great importance for France.

This syllogism only incompletely explains the French familiarity with the Åland Islands. In fact, it responds to a cyclic political agenda of a country that has always endeavoured to position herself in the North. However, her two main geostrategic orientations have always been the East and the South. Regarding the North, it is usually considered that this area has been less part of her zone of interests. Moreover, as Bruno Tertrais bluntly noted, *'Interest in Northern European security issues in France has been limited so far to Northern Europe, and the Arctic region is not on the radar screen of the average French strategist'*.⁵ This area was rather peripheral for France, predominantly compared to the Mediterranean area. France is without a doubt a Mediterranean power and has been for centuries. Yet, she has hitherto shown a longstanding presence in Northern Europe, but in a more discreet way.

France has also always considered her interest that the countries which make up Northern Europe, whether neutral or allied to France, should not be the victims of the predatory aims of her foes, namely Germany and Russia. Moreover, it is noteworthy that France has never been in war against a Nordic state, with some exceptions linked to the Napoleonic period.⁶ Incidentally, it is precisely during the negotiations in Tilsit that the French Emperor would 'allow' the Russian Tsar to seize Finland, with the Åland Islands, to the detriment of Sweden. *'Keeping Finland without the Åland Islands would be like someone who would accept a chest but would get rid of the keys'*⁷ would have said General Caulaincourt, French Ambassador to Russia. However, Sweden was trying to preserve her sovereignty over the Åland Islands. Note that this famous citation may be apocryphal. The following quote is sometimes attributed to Napoléon: *'Taking Finland without going through Åland is like a puzzle lock strongbox without the keys'*.⁸ Norman J. Padelford

5 Tertrais 2001, p. 27

6 See Åselius and Caniart 2009 for a global perspective on this topic.

7 *'Garder la Finlande sans les Îles Åland, ce serait comme quelqu'un qui accepterait une malle mais en jetterait les clefs'*. Quoted by van der Vlugt 1920, p. 81. Note that translations of French texts quoted in this article are unofficial translations by the author.

8 *'Prendre la Finlande sans passer par Åland, c'est comme si l'on prenait une cassette à fermeture secrète*

and K. Gösta A. Anderson slightly differently attribute this citation: *'To defend Finland without the Åland Islands would be the same thing as taking a strongbox of which one had given up the keys'*⁹ to the Russian delegate Roumiantzoff, whereas Russia was insisting on the islands during the 1809 peace negotiations.

In any event, whoever the original author and whatever the exact formulation are, this indicates a strong awareness, already at that time, of the geostrategic assets of the Åland Islands as confirmed by M. Bail, the author of a volume compiling letters between Bernadotte and Napoléon published in 1819. M. Bail wrote in the preface: *'The Åland Islands are no less valuable since their distance from the coast is only 34 miles; from the archipelago to Stockholm only 30; from Stockholm itself only 60; and last but not least the Baltic Sea, which separates Sweden and Russia, is frozen throughout the winter, strongly enough to make it possible to transport canons. As a result, Russian armies can rapidly march right through to the heart of Sweden'*.¹⁰

From the 19th century, each time France was a belligerent against Russia or Germany, the Åland Islands were sometimes peripheral, sometimes central, but never absent from the French strategic and diplomatic agenda. Thus, during the three major times when the Åland Islands were concerned by international conflicts or disputes, France was very active in the establishment of settlements. In the Crimean War (1853–1856), the French and the British attacked the Russians on their western flank by destroying the Fortress of Bormarsund built on the Åland Islands. During the peace negotiations which ensued, Paris and London demanded the demilitarisation of the archipelago. It was French diplomacy, alongside British, that imposed this sanction on Russia in a treaty signed in Paris. After the First World War, it was again French diplomacy, within the League of Nations, that was more active in elaborating the convention on the Non-Fortification and Neutralisation of the Åland Islands. Last but not least, it is in the Treaty of Paris (10th February 1947) that ended the Second World War that the demilitarisation of the Åland Islands was confirmed. Indeed, even if during the after war, she had not the political means to contest Soviet diplomacy and could only align herself with the USSR. France was widely concerned by the future of Finland and the Åland Islands.

Moreover, it is worth noting the multifaceted image between the strategic and diplomatic French activities on the one hand, and the abundance of the French literature that examines the Åland Islands on the other hand. Distinguish between, on the one hand, 'swashbucklers'

dont on n'a pas les clefs'. Quoted by Tissot 1939, p. 164.

9 Padelford and Anderson 1939, p. 466.

10 *'L'île d' Åland n'est pas moins précieuse, puisqu'elle n'est éloignée de la côte que de 34 milles; de l'archipel, vis-à-vis Stockholm, que de 30; de Stockholm même, que de 60; et qu'enfin la Baltique, qui sépare la Suède de la Russie, gèle tous les hivers assez fort pour qu'on puisse y faire passer du canon. Il résulte de là que les armées russes peuvent se trouver en quelques marches au cœur de la Suède'*. Baille 1819, p. 12.

who participated in military operations when France was a belligerent penned by French militaries and, on the other hand, articles and books penned by scholars.

Even if the numerous books and articles ranked in the first category may indeed be of limited interest for historians; by telling them, even by bluntly narrating fights, militaries essentially constructed ‘epic tales’ to glorify the French army. These may enlighten the French public about the strategic political stakes in the Baltic Sea in general. This category is, indeed, far from homogeneous. Some books can be penned by militaries with the only aim being to celebrate French glory. There is, in that regard, a startling example from the section of the military journal *Journal des opérations de l’artillerie et du génie* that examines the ‘Siège de Bormarsund’ published in 1854. In the journal, its authors, General Adolphe Niel and Colonel Gaëtan Rochebouët, described the battle in a genuinely epic manner¹¹. Baron César de Bazancourt, who was the ‘official’ historian of the French Second Empire, wrote *L’Expédition de Crimée. La marine française dans la mer Noire et la Baltique* (1869), in which some large sections examine the French naval operations in the Baltic Sea.¹² Commander Frankowski’s thesis titled *La Campagne de la Baltique en 1854*, penned at the École Supérieure de Guerre Navale, analysed French naval military operations in the Åland Islands with a strong emphasis on tactical aspects without neglecting the diplomatic and strategic ones.¹³ Moreover, some other accounts were written in militaries’ memoirs. For instance, Admiral Marius Peltier, who was the Naval Défense attaché in Helsinki and Stockholm between 1940 and 1941, published *Campagne en mer Baltique. Souvenirs* in 1965 and *La Finlande dans la tourmente* in 1966¹⁴ in which there is some very useful information about the French position on the Åland Islands during the interwar period.

The category of books and articles penned by scholars is less ‘confidential’. The most significant book, which deals with all the social aspects of the Åland Islands, is undoubtedly Louis-Antoine Léouzon Le Duc’s volume, titled *Les îles d’Åland* (1854).¹⁵ A jurist, René Waultrin, made a brilliant analysis of geostrategic stakes linked to the Åland Islands at the beginning of the 20th century in the *Revue générale de droit international public*. The author is particularly keen to analyse and to bring solutions to security and defence issues through the prism of law while going beyond strict legal analysis.¹⁶ In quantitative terms, it is undoubtedly during the interwar period that the Åland Islands emerged. A real ‘buzz’ for ‘La question des Îles Åland’ took hold of French academics.

From the end of the First World War, a considerable amount of research was carried out on the Åland Islands issue. Four doctoral dissertations in international law that

11 Niel and Rochebouët, 1868.

12 Bazancourt 1869.

13 Frankowski 1923.

14 Peltier 1965 and Peltier 1966.

15 Léouzon Le Duc 1854.

16 Waultrin 1907, p. 517–533.

examined the Åland Islands were undertaken in French universities and defended during the interwar period.¹⁷ In addition, some articles were penned that hold the attention of the reader by examining strategic issues on the Åland Islands before the Second World War. For instance, Fernand de Visscher, professor of international law, published ‘La question des îles d’Åland’ in the *Revue de droit international et de législation comparée* in 1921. The author analysed the issue according to legal and also geopolitical considerations.¹⁸ The geographer Pierre Camena d’Almeida wrote an article in 1922 on physical geography on the Åland Islands in the *Annales de Géographie*¹⁹. Moreover, Georges Chabot published a small article pointing out geostrategic stakes of the islands in the same review.²⁰

The ‘proliferation’ of literature made sense. Invested with her status of victorious power of the First World War, France was considered a major actor to countries interested in the Åland Islands, principally Sweden and Finland, thanks to her prestige but also her diplomatic and strategic weight in the settlement of the dispute. At the end of the First World War, France prepared a gathering of diplomats, academics, and militaries within a ‘Comité d’études’, a substantial work which was to settle all the European territorial disputes after the Great War.²¹ Even if the Åland Islands issue had not been clearly mentioned per se, it was clear that the voice of France would be one of the most determinant in the pacification in the aftermath of war. In that respect, it made sense that Sweden and Finland would target France by encouraging journalists, scholars, and even militaries and diplomats to be in favour of their respective position.²²

After the Second World War, the interest in the Åland Islands decreased dramatically when it was put on the back burner. However, there were indeed still some handbooks in international law which sometimes dealt with ‘*La question des Îles Åland*’. In addition, some scholars who studied the Nordic States became interested in the Åland Islands, but only tangentially. For instance, Jean-Jacques Fol (1977) composed a doctoral dissertation on the independence of Finland.²³ The famous professor of history at *la Sorbonne*, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, supervised the doctoral dissertation of the Swedish-speaking scholar Jean-Pierre Mousson-Lestang (1988). His PhD examined the Swedish Social Democrats during the First World War.²⁴ Both doctoral dissertations contained several references to

17 Jégou du Laz 1923; Popovici 1923; Boursot 1923 and Maury 1930.

18 Visscheer 1921, p. 243–284.

19 Camena d’Almeida 1922, p. 174–178.

20 Chabot 1939, p. 328–329

21 Lowczyk 2010.

22 A good example is Jean Denier, alias Raymond Migeot. Hired by Finns, he penned a booklet in 1919 titled *L’Attribution des îles d’Åland* for the Paris Peace Conference. See *A Catalogue of Paris Peace Conference Delegation Propaganda in the Hoover War Library* for an exhaustive list of all the publications written in French (1926, p. 33–35).

23 Fol 1977.

24 Mousson-Lestang 1995 (the dissertation was defended in 1988).

the Åland Islands. Nevertheless, in his book *La Scandinavie et l'Europe de 1945 à nos jours* (1990), Jean-Pierre Mousson-Lestang does not mention the Åland Islands. Likewise, in her doctoral dissertation in political science that examines Finland, nor does Françoise Thiebaut (1990) refer to the Åland Islands. Note two other books, penned by two French authors interested in geostrategic issues in the Baltic Sea area, *Changement de cap en mer Baltique*²⁵ and, in Europe, *Les Neutres, la neutralité et l'Europe*²⁶, which are also without references to the Åland Islands.

Indeed, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle (1985), in his *opus magnum Histoire diplomatique de 1919 à nos jours* briefly mentions the Åland Islands, whereas Hervé Coutau-Bégarie (1995), in his book that examines the concept of naval disarmament, analyses the status of disarmament of the islands, incidentally with scepticism.²⁷ The Norwegian speaking geographer Michel Cabouret published several books on the Nordic states. Amongst all his publications, some of them touch on the Åland Islands, but from a physical geography perspective.²⁸ Eventually, the feeling is that during this period the Åland Islands were admittedly circumstantial.²⁹ If France indeed continued, under her remote watchful eye, to be attentive to the legal obligations of the 1856 treaty and the 1921 convention, the strategic configuration of Northern Europe 'frozen' by the Cold war was stable to a certain extent. This did not jeopardise the status of the demilitarisation and neutralisation of the Åland Islands. France was only interested in that region in a very peripheral way.³⁰

The situation changed slowly as of 1995, when Sweden and Finland joined the EU. Some articles penned by some French scholars have been published here and there, contributing to the 'rediscovery' of the Åland Islands, even though the issue stays, to a certain extent, quite 'confidential' and confined to the studies of a small circle of scholars. In her doctoral dissertation in political science that examines Swedish neutrality (1995), Nathalie Blanc-Noël mentions the Åland Islands several times.³¹ Paul Giniewski (1997) published in the military journal *Revue de défense nationale* an article on the islands.³² Even if this article may be open to criticism (it contains some mistakes), it can be considered seminal. The author of the present article published a policy paper in 2006 whilst working at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on the concept of geographic disarmament

25 Blanc-Noël 1992.

26 Carton 1992.

27 Coutau-Bégarie 1995, p. 41–43.

28 See, for instance, Cabouret 1984, p. 58–61 and Cabouret 2001, p. 191–207.

29 An exception (that would prove the rule?): a book written by Aurélien Sauvageot, professor of Finnish and Hungarian in Paris at the École des Langues orientales, *Histoire de la Finlande* (1968), in which there is a substantial part that examines the Åland Islands.

30 Mozaffari 2000.

31 Blanc-Noël, 1997 (the dissertation was defended in 1995).

32 Giniewski 1997.

in Northern Europe, a major part of the study examining the Åland Islands.³³ An article which came from this study was thereafter published in French in the *Annuaire français de relations internationales* (2007).³⁴ A few years later, a book was edited in French that gathers scholars who examine the status of the Åland Islands in historical depth.³⁵ Last but not least, Christophe Prémat, a French academic and deputy at the National Assembly (representative of the French residing in Northern Europe), wrote an interesting paper that reviews the geopolitical situation of the Åland Islands.³⁶ Note also a doctoral dissertation recently defended by Louis Clerc. In his work about relations between France and Finland during the interwar period, there is a substantial part on the Åland Island issue.³⁷

3. France and the ‘Åland factor’ on the European diplomatic chessboard between 1853 and 1921

The Åland Islands are subject to the geopolitical iron law: due to their exceptional geostrategic position, they can be a threat for some and an asset for others. As France has been allied with and/or an enemy of most of these countries, she has been, directly or not, concerned by them. Her permanent difficulty has always been to overlap the interests of the security of her allies against her foes. The Bolshevik Revolution, followed by the independence of Finland accepted after a period of hesitation, indeed changed the French perspective on the situation. If the idea of the ‘Russian Åland Islands’ was off the agenda, France was not willing to choose between Finland and Sweden both claiming sovereignty over the Archipelago. Finally, she defended the idea to hand over the issue to the League of Nations, and did her best to find a *modus vivendi* to appease all parties concerned.

3.1. ‘Running with the hare and hunting with the hounds’: the Åland Islands between French allies and enemies

In the French strategic political agenda, the Åland Islands saliently arose during the outbreak of the Crimean War (1853–1856), whereas France and England sought to hit Russia on the western flank. Paris and London proposed to offer the Åland Islands to Sweden if her fleet would assist in their blockage of Kronstadt. Fearing Russian reappraisals after the war, the Swedes refused. Thereupon, French and British decided to destroy the Fortress of Bomarsund.

Through the Treaty of Paris (1856), which ended the war, the victorious countries, France

33 Chillaud 2006.

34 Chillaud 2007.

35 Chillaud 2009.

36 Prémat 2008.

37 Clerc 2007a, p. 93–132.

and England, imposed the demilitarisation of the Åland Islands on the defeated, Russia. Russia was not allowed to undertake any military or naval construction on the islands. The demilitarisation of the Åland Islands was the result of a compromise between, on the one hand, London who wanted to secure the archipelago that was considered to be a threat against Sweden and, on the other hand, Paris who wanted good relations with Russia after the peace agreement. Through a knock-on effect, it turned out to be a genuine ‘indirect reward’ for Sweden, Auguste Goffroy arguing bluntly that *‘the perpetual guarantee of Western powers, the permanent securing of Finnmark, and the assurance of no longer having to fear a Russian citadel or fortress on the islands in front of Stockholm; that’s what is contained in the famous 5th point’*.³⁸ Even if Sweden was not a signatory to the treaty and was particularly concerned when observing Russia’s obligation, she has always sought to make herself heard.

For the French, the sovereignty over the Åland Islands was not questioned. The conclusion of the Franco-Russian alliance from 1891 strengthened this perspective, even though the Russians still had to respect the 1856 treaty vis à vis Paris. Nonetheless, as Russia was becoming a major ally against Germany, her perspective became more flexible. For Paris, it was of importance to guarantee that Germany would not use the archipelago for strategic purposes against Russia, and simultaneously to reassure Sweden that a possible Russian defensive rearmament of the Åland Islands would not be a threat against Sweden.

On 23rd April 1908, representatives from Germany, Denmark, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Sweden declared their firm resolution to *‘preserve intact, and mutually to respect, the sovereign rights which their countries at present enjoy over their respective territories’* in or bordering the North Sea. In the memorandum signed on the same day by the representatives of the five contracting powers, the North Sea was considered *‘to extend eastward as far as its junction with the waters of the Baltic’*. Five days after, a convention under the patronage of Saint Petersburg was signed by Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Denmark. It guaranteed the Baltic status quo, but avoided any mention of the demilitarisation of the Åland Islands while ambiguously recognising full Russian sovereignty over them. Nobody was really credulous about the motivations of Russia, whose primary aim was, at first, to reassure Sweden, and afterwards to get international approval to revise the treaty of 1856 so as to permit the remilitarisation of the Åland Islands.³⁹

At the beginning of the First World War, the Triple Entente wanted Sweden to remain neutral. In spite of her neutrality, Sweden had to consider public opinion on whether to be in favor of the Triple Entente or in favor of the Triple Alliance. It was in this context that the

38 *‘Garantie perpétuelle des puissances occidentales, fixation définitive du Finnmark (sic), assurance de n’avoir plus à redouter dans les îles situées en avant de Stockholm, une citadelle ou une station russe, voilà donc ce que recélait ce fameux 5^e point’*. Geffroy A., 1856.

39 Fløeckher 1908, p. 271.

issue of the rearmament of the Åland Islands by Russians became particularly salient in Sweden. Because of the intense naval activity of Germany in the Baltic Sea, Russia decided to refortify the Åland Islands from January 1915, but simultaneously assured Sweden that it would be temporary. Fearing that what was temporary would become permanent, Sweden sought guarantees. In order to appease the situation, Russia formally penned her commitment, which was hitherto only verbal. This was supported by Great Britain and France, who wanted more than anything to confine, to the extent possible, the German influence in Northern Europe.

3.2. ‘Making the best of a bad job’: towards the Finnish solution

After the Bolshevik Revolution and the end of the Great War, understanding the French position on the Åland Islands requires considering French motivations in the new geostrategic and geopolitical landscape of the region. France wanted to avoid the ripple effect of the Russian revolution, to prevent the ‘new’ Germany from regaining its influence, and to advance her stakes in a region where her influence was rather limited.

One of the first difficulties that France had to tackle was precisely the issue of the Åland Islands. The question had already arisen during the Bolshevik Revolution. After the collapse of Germany and the subsequent annulment of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the legal ownership of the islands remained in doubt between the two main riparian Baltic States. The residents of the islands claimed their right to self-determination and demanded reunification with Sweden. This separatist movement was supported by Sweden but opposed by Finland, who insisted on its sovereignty over the archipelago, and was only willing to offer it an autonomous status. Yet, even though France was persistently the object of very active Swedish diplomacy in favour of the reunification of the Åland Islands with the ‘motherland’, France did not seem to be willing to immediately appease the Swedes.

In such a complicated game of chess, the French were not willing to disclose their agenda, which turned out to be uncertain anyway. The precept ‘the enemies of my enemies are my friends’ was hardly apt in such a strategic configuration. On the one hand, it was necessary to immunise the region from ‘Bolshevik contagion’ (and to simultaneously preserve the Russian borders as much as possible) and, on the other hand, to contain German influence. In addition, it was necessary that the thorny relationships between Finland and Sweden, upheld by sensitive nationalism in the two countries and also in the Åland Islands, did not escalate into warfare.

In the meantime, some of the French considered the possibility of Finland and the Åland Islands as a buffer zone between Russia and Germany. In October 1917, some plans circulated within the French general staff that bluntly evoked the possibility to

grant the whole of Finland and the Åland Islands to neutral Sweden.⁴⁰ After a period of consideration, France decided to recognise the independence of Finland in January 1918.⁴¹ Nonetheless, during the Finnish Civil War between the Whites and the Reds, the German military presence in Finland complicated the situation. On the one hand, when the Swedes sent an expeditionary force to the Åland Islands in order to protect the people against the Russians, for the allies, such a decision prevented a possible German intervention, which still took place later. When the Whites won the war, the Åland Islands were occupied by German troops. For the French, the Finns were becoming dangerously too Germanophile. Nonetheless, numerous French militaries and diplomats saw Mannerheim as a reliable partner against the Bolsheviks. Finnish claims over the Åland Islands had to be considered if France were to take advantage of her services against the Bolsheviks.

At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, Stephen Pichon, the French Minister of Foreign affairs, proposed to postpone the issue of the Åland Islands *sine die* pending the settlement of the Russian problem. Albert Kemmerer, the French representative in the Commission of Baltic Affairs at the Paris Peace Conference, stated that the aim of the commission was not to solve the issue of the Åland islands, but to request the League of Nations to do so. For him, it was necessary to preserve the *status quo*, which could be strategically highly important for a future Russia.⁴² Ultimately, in spite of the low esteem for Swedish neutrality, the idea to grant to Sweden the Åland Islands was eventually seen as a lesser evil. On 25th September 1919, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, pleading the case for the Treaty of Versailles, mentioned possible reparations for the iniquities that were imposed on Sweden concerning the issue of the Åland Islands. The aim of the French was, above all, to urge the Finns to cooperate with the White Russians against the Bolsheviks. Nonetheless, the retreat of the latter in Petrograd put an end to the French strategy.

Finland or Sweden? Which one of them would be granted the sovereignty over the Åland Islands? The French stated loud and clear that they had no interest in favouring one of the two parties. Even during King Gustav V of Sweden's visit to Paris in April 1920, the Swedes did not gain much from the French, despite a strong propaganda organised by Stockholm as well as by Helsinki. The idea that a solution had to be found by the League of Nations gained ground, and a commission of jurists was appointed. On the record, France did not wish to interfere. Nonetheless, in accordance with the commission's recommendations, the French urged the Finns to agree to grant to the Åland Islands extensive autonomy as well as total demilitarisation. The principal pending problem was the form of the binding agreement that would facilitate the comprehensive disarmament of the archipelago; a new convention that would wipe the slate clean of the 1856 convention

40 Clerc 2009, p. 56.

41 Clerc 2007b.

42 Clerc 2009, p. 58.

(but in that case, the issue was knowing whether the League of Nations could terminate an international agreement). Perhaps a bilateral agreement between Sweden and Finland? An additional issue was whether Germany should be associated with the new convention. For the French diplomats, French Prime Minister Aristide Briand's instructions to Jean Gout, French negotiator of the 1921 demilitarisation agreement, were clear on at least one point: the preservation of the 1856 convention was of significant importance, especially in order to maintain Russian interests. In the draft written by the French jurist and diplomat Henri Fromageot, a consensus was found.

Based on the commission's report and the consideration of the parties involved, the League of Nations Council adopted a resolution in June 1921, which recognised Finland's sovereignty over the Åland Islands, but recommended autonomy for the territory. The islands were also to remain demilitarised and neutralised. The recommendations of the League of Nations were accepted by the parties to the conflict. The Convention on the Non-Fortification and Neutralisation of the Åland Islands signed on 20th October 1921 widely corresponded with French intentions, even though there was no unanimity among officials in the French Ministry of Foreign affairs divided between those who were in favour of Sweden and those who were in favour of Finland.

4. Conclusion

Neither riparian of the Baltic Sea nor 'Northern power', France has nonetheless considerably influenced the fate of the Åland Islands since the 19th century. Nowadays, very few in France are aware of that. This 'amnesia' could be due to the self-perception that the primary strategic aims of France would (only) be in the South and East of Europe. Yet, France has hitherto shown a strong commitment to Northern Europe. Since the 19th century, notwithstanding the changing strategic configuration in Europe, France has always had allies or enemies/adversaries particularly concerned by the Åland Islands. Her permanent aim was a balancing act. On the one hand, France wanted to preserve the security interests of her allies and simultaneously deny her enemies any of the advantages that the control of the Åland Islands would provide. On the other hand, it was necessary to enforce the legal obligations of demilitarisation and/or neutralisation.

The question has arisen differently since the end of the 1980s. After the Cold War, the reconfiguration of Euro-Atlantic architecture was particularly noticeable in Northern Europe. This was principally due to the independence of the Baltic states, their later membership of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Sweden's and Finland's membership of the EU. In addition, the subsequent tensions between NATO and Russia in the Baltic Sea area could not disregard France, a country who is at the heart of a network of security organisations of which Nordic and

Baltic states are also members. Moreover, France is a unique major European power within the EU and NATO, and a signatory of all the major international treaties that determine the status of the Åland Islands. In fact, after Brexit, France is henceforth the only country that is both a member of the EU and NATO and part of the 1856 Treaty of Paris. In this respect, France cannot be uninterested by the North, an area in which she must show her commitment and solidarity.

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