

FINNISH OFFICERS IN THE RUSSIAN ARMY AND NAVY DURING THE AUTONOMY PERIOD (1809–1917)



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The armed forces of the Russian Empire, with its many different peoples, were inevitably heterogeneous in their national composition although their official character was firmly Russian as well as imperial. Throughout the eighteenth century the rulers of Russia had been eager to acquire the services of their non-Russian subjects and of foreigners as soldiers, technicians and administrators. Men of the highest social classes entered imperial service as military and naval officers and as civil officials of comparable rank. Thus the Germans of the Baltic provinces and the inhabitants of Old Finland, the Viipuri province ceded to Russia in 1721, were attracted gradually into the service of their new sovereign. By the time the rest of Finland was united with the Russian Empire in 1809 many upper class Finns from Old Finland were serving as officers in the Russian army.

The Russian tradition of encouraging new subjects to enter imperial service continued into the nineteenth century. The opportunity to serve the Emperor became therefore open to the inhabitants of Finland as a whole after 1809. A strong tradition of service to the state - for reasons of social prestige and economic necessity - already existed among members of the Swedish-speaking upper class in Finland. After the severance of the political connection with Sweden circumstances became favourable to the entry of Finns into Russian service as officers.¹

A factor of crucial importance in inducing Finns to become officers in the Russian army and navy was the lack of opportunity for such service in Finnish units. The Finnish army that had fought against the Russians in 1808-09 was promptly disbanded, the

officers being retired on generous terms taht did much to reconcile them to the new connection with Russia as well as to avert a catastrophic effect on the livelihood of a sizeable part of the upper class. There were three subsequent phases of military activity in Finland during the nineteenth century, from 1812 to 1830, from 1854 to 1868 and from 1881 to 1901, but the number of troops raised during these periods was never large and only the Guards Finnish Rifle Battalion enjoyed a continuous existence until its disbandment in 1905.² The very impermanence of the Finnish forces, their limitation to infantry or rifles (though there was also a small naval unit for some years), and their restricted size encouraged service in the Russian army, by contrast a vast and stable force, in which career opportunities were wide and constant and where the prospect of active service appealed to a keen officer. The Russian navy, which sailed far beyond the Baltic and Black Seas, had its own attraction to the seafaring Finns.

But Russian service was attractive, too, even to the less adventurous members of the Finnish upper class, during the first half of the nineteenth century because the opportunities for suitable occupations in Finland were so few. Pressure to obtain civil and military posts in Finland was reduced by some members of the upper class entering the Russian army and navy which had a large and continuing need for officers.³ The existence in Finland of an officer training school, founded at Haapaniemi in Savo in 1812 and transferred to Hamina in 1819 as the Finnish Cadet Corps, resulted in the production of a steady stream of Finnish officers for whom there was no employment except in Russian service.⁴

Before the reform of military education in Russia in the 1860s, the recruitment of officers was based, with minor exceptions, not on education or ability but on birth. Thus nobles were privileged in being able to attend military educational institutions, such as cadet corps, which gave them the possibi-

lity of a good start to a military or naval career. Nobles who entered military service as volunteer non-commissioned officers- the method by which the majority of officers was obtained - had to serve for a shorter time before they were commissioned than members of other groups which enjoyed the privilege of entry as volunteers, such as the sons of clergy or of merchants.

Although the Russians were happy for Finns to become officers, problems arose in fitting them into the social categories used in Russia. The principle was established as early as 1820 that Finns stood in the same position in relation to entry to Russian military service as the corresponding Russian privileged estates.⁵ Although the interpretation of this principle caused difficulties, the system of entry according to privilege was not a handicap to the majority of Finns who wanted to become officers since they were the sons of officers, or of officials, or nobles, all categories actually encouraged by the system to enter military service.

To enter Russian service was, of course, an action which in many cases was not undertaken without serious thought. There was at first reluctance to enter the foreign world that the Empire represented. Nevertheless, by the 1820s, when the first generation brought up since the beginning of Russian rule was reaching military age, old antipathies to Russia as the former enemy of Sweden and Finland had lessened or vanished, the Empire seemed less strange and a greater willingness to enter the Russian army was to be expected. By this time, too, the battalions of the Russian garrison in Finland were accepted as having close ties with the country.

The 1830s and 1840s witnessed a number of measures to encourage Finns to enter the Russian army and navy. The Finnish Cadet Corps was enlarged to an establishment of 120 cadets, scholarships for Finns were introduced at the Russian Naval Cadet Corps and at the Pavlovsky Cadet Corps

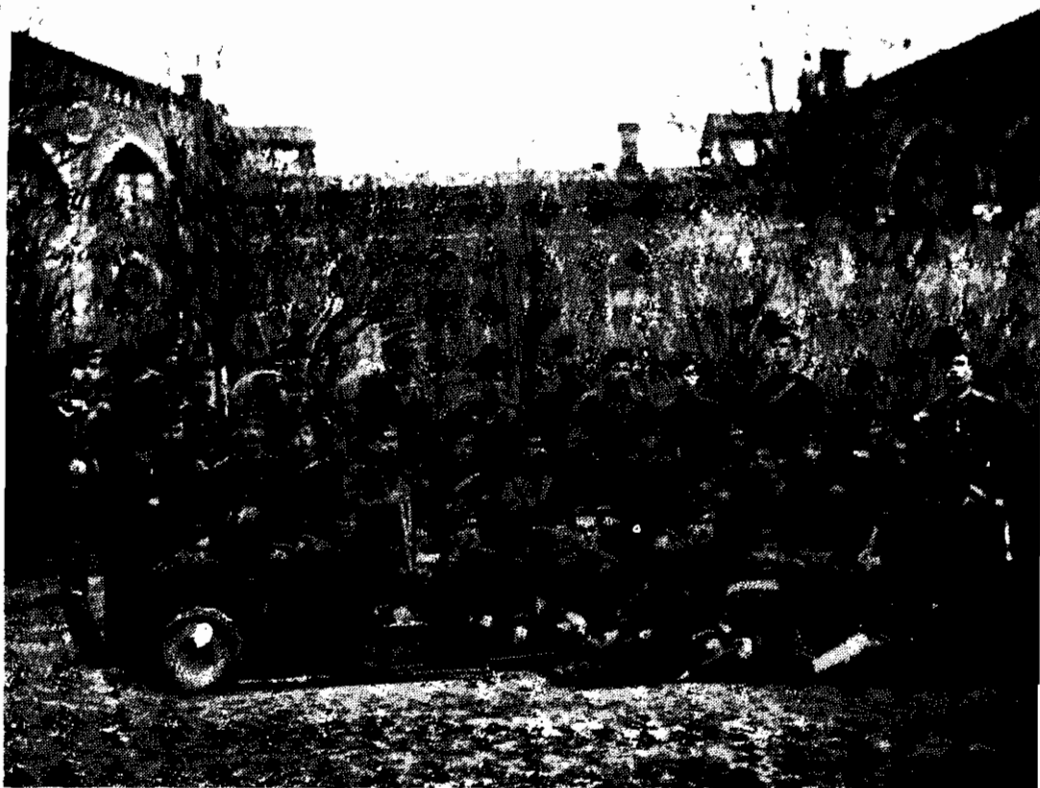
which trained army officers. The most remarkable Finnish privilege in respect of military education in Russia, the unique reservation of places for Finns at the exclusive Page Corps, was instituted a little later, in 1855. These scholarship arrangements persisted, with various modifications, until 1917. Of great significance, too, was the setting up, with financial aid from the Finnish government, in 1846 of a Yunker School in Helsinki to train as officers young men who entered the Russian army in Finland as volunteers. (In the Russian army at that time the term yunker designated a noble accepted for service as a volunteer before becoming an officer.) For the greater part of its existence the Helsinki Yunker School emphasised the teaching of the Russian language to Finns, a subject which always proved difficult to those Finnish potential officers who were entirely reliant on Russian taught in Finnish schools.⁶

Demand to enter Russian service probably reached a peak during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55) and official encouragement of cadets and volunteers was partly a response to existing pressure to become officers. In addition, some prominent Finns looked on service in Russia as a means of drawing Finland into closer contact with the Empire as well as providing, for political and administrative reasons, a group of Finns who would acquire - particularly if educated in Russia - a thorough knowledge of the Russian language. The reign of Nicholas I was a time when there were few career opportunities in Finland, few Finnish military units, and few opportunities in Russia itself outside military service. Prejudice against Russia as the old enemy had died in Finland and the new Finnish nationalism had not yet gained wide support. Nor had Russian nationalism come to influence what remained the service of the sovereign. The low standards of education and training of much of the Russian officer corps were actually to the advantage of those Finns whose knowledge of Russian was poor.

However, after 1860 many of the factors conducive to the entry of Finns into Russian military service were reversed. The Russian garrison in Finland seemed more alien as units were rotated regularly. The spread of education in Finland gave in theory more men the qualifications to become officers - though the Russian language was less taught - just when the educational requirements of the army were rising and the importance of the social origin of potential officers was reduced. In practice, the improvement of career opportunities both in Finland and in Russia with the expansion of industry and trade caused service as an officer to represent only one of many careers open to a rapidly growing body of educated - and increasingly Finnish-speaking - men. Many of the new occupations were financially more attractive than service as an officer and this fact was not lost on young men deciding on their careers.

A further disincentive to becoming an officer in Russian service was the change in the worse in opinion in Finland towards Russia and in Russia towards Finland. Student circles in Helsinki in the 1850s had already felt that to enter Russian service was improper. This view was strengthened and widened by the growth of liberal opinion in Finland. With the revival of the Diet and the institution of economic reforms which helped to separate Finland from Russia, Finnish autonomy came to mean more. Finland and not the Empire became increasingly the focus of Finnish loyalty. A consequence of this was the unwillingness even of members of the Finnish government to see advantage for Finland in the encouragement of the service of Finns as Russian officers.

Reaction in Russia to the development of what appeared to be a foreign state within its borders became unfavourable and provoked the constitutional conflict with Finland at the end of the nineteenth century. At this point, some Finnish officers serving in Rus-



The Russian Yunker School in Helsinki trained many Finns as infantry officers. This group, photographed outside the School in 1867, includes a Finnish instructor and several Finnish pupils. (photograph: Museo-virasto)

sia began to experience a clash of loyalties between Finland on the one hand and the Emperor, the Empire and the armed forces on the other. A few Finnish officers left the service but many remained, avoiding any concern with politics, keeping away from units stationed in Finland, and generally not encountering prejudice on the part of their Russian colleagues. The russification policy did, however, contribute to the decline in the number of Finns willing to become officers in the Russian army and navy.

For these various reasons, the broadening of the recruitment of the Russian officer corps after education rather than social origin had become the principal criterion for becoming an officer in the 1860s and 1870s did not result in an increasing number of officers from

Finland. In fact the decline in the number of Finns at the Helsinki Yunker School was a factor leading to its closure in 1879 since the Finnish government felt it was no longer getting good value for its contribution to the School's upkeep. Closure of the School in turn reduced the opportunity for Finns to train as officers. The closure of the Finnish Cadet Corps in 1903 because of Russian nationalist pressure dealt an even more severe blow to Finns seeking a military education since Finnish boys brought up in Finland were usually inadequately prepared in the Russian language to enter cadet corps in Russia. The decline in the number of Finns serving as officers in the Russian army and navy reflected the growing differentiation of Finland from the Empire as political changes followed the growth of Finnish and Russian nationalism.

There is plenty of information, much of it contemporary, about the numbers and names of Finns in Russian service.⁷ None of this information is official partly because Russian service records were interested in social origin rather than in nationality and partly because upper class Finns were excluded from the system of registering Finnish migrants in Russia that was maintained by the Finnish Passport Office in St Petersburg. Moreover, even those Finns who made contemporary estimates of the number of Finnish officers had considerable problems in deciding who was a Finn. Surnames were not always reliable indicators of nationality since many Swedish-Finnish names were duplicated by German names in the Baltic provinces. Second and third generations of Finns might be completely russified even if still legally Finnish. Nevertheless, it may be estimated that up to 4,000 Finns served at some time as officers in the Russian army and navy between 1809 and 1917. By the early 1830s there were some 400 Finnish officers in the Russian army and navy; this had risen to at least 700 by 1850. Thereafter the number fell and it had dropped to under 400 by 1914.

A very large proportion of upper class families had members in Russian service though this is not to say that they all served in Russia. It was, for example, estimated in 1833 that about half of the officers of the battalions of the Russian garrison in Finland were Finns,⁸ but many of these officers would never have served in the Empire. However, just over a fifth of all adult males belonging to the Finnish nobility (143 out of 695) were serving in Russia in about 1850 and rather less than a fifth in 1871. Even in 1916 about a tenth of Finnish noblemen (130 out of 1,231) were serving in Russia.⁹

Thanks to the existence of the Finnish Cadet Corps exclusively for Finns - though not just for Finnish nobles - and the scholarships for Finns at Russian cadet corps, a notable proportion of Finnish officers obtained the best type of preparation available for a military

career. Thus 702 of the 955 cadets commissioned from the Finnish Cadet Corps during its long existence entered Russian units, while some of those who entered Finnish units would have transferred subsequently to Russian service. Over 100 Finns became officers after attending the Naval Cadet Corps in places specially reserved for Finns. About the same number attended the Page Corps. Military education at these privileged establishments facilitated the entry of Finns to the guard, since those who completed such courses with the best results could be considered for commissions in guards regiments. This was advantageous in that many of the army's senior officers were drawn from the guard. A good education also improved chances of entering the artillery and engineers, which demanded a relatively high standard, and of subsequently attending the general staff academy and other academies for specialist officers. Officers who entered the army as volunteers were less likely to advance far in their careers but for some years even Finns who became officers in that way had the advantage of attending in Helsinki a yunker school which had been set up well in advance of the foundation of such establishments throughout the army.

Finnish officers served in all branches of the army and navy - a few even in the Cossacks - but they tended to be concentrated disproportionately in the guard, the artillery, the general staff and the engineers, in other words in the most prestigious and influential areas. Because of their tendency to enjoy privileged training, and of course also because of their ability, the number of high-ranking Finns exceeded the proportion of Finnish officers in the army and navy as a whole. Yrjö Koskinen, writing in 1877, calculated on the basis of names in official army lists that forty-two Finns were serving as generals, a figure which exceeded comfortably the total of thirty-two generals in the army of Sweden and Norway. He commented, not unreasonably, that "If we lack soldiers, at

least we have no shortage of commanders".¹⁰

Some Finnish officers achieved considerable fame. General Anders Edvard Ramsay, who commanded briefly in Poland in 1863, rose high in the favour of the Emperor. General Axel Gadolin was one of the great artillery technicians of the Russian army, whose work is mentioned with praise by modern Soviet writers, who conveniently forget his nationality. General Oskar Gripenberg commanded at the luckless battle of Sandepu during the Russo-Japanese War, resigning in disgust at the conduct of his commander-in-chief. Admiral Theodor Avellan, as director of the Navy Ministry, bore a share of responsibility for the naval disasters of the same war - and was sacked. Quite apart from ordinary military and naval service, Finnish officers in Russia ran armaments factories, surveyed remote areas, and built railways.

The consequences of the service of Finns in the Russian army and navy are hard to assess. The Finnish historian E. G. Palmén, writing in 1908, concluded an article about Finns in foreign service with the words, "A regretful fatherland remembers each one who has grown up here to be capable of work in order to give to other lands and peoples the fruits of their labours. But no matter where his career has taken him, each one, tossed by fate on foreign shores, deserves the respect and gratitude of future generations for preserving the virtue of his forefathers and for bringing honour to the name and nation of Finland".¹¹ For Russia, the Finnish officers represented a generally reliable and capable group of officers. General Nikolai Nikolaevich Murav'ev (1794-1866) considered that Finns "have always performed their duties correctly and efficiently and that as men they have always been both honourable and devoted".¹² Finns in Russian service enjoyed their own society and met together when they could but they were not clannish and exclusive in their social life. They escaped the resentment sometimes aroused by the Germans and the mistrust that

affected relations with the Poles, two nationalities by which they were always heavily outnumbered.

The educated Russians' view of Finland and the Finns, which was not initially particularly favourable, may have been modified in the middle of the nineteenth century by contact with members of the Swedish-speaking upper class who were serving as officers. Some Finnish officers, who had gained the confidence of the Emperor or of Russian statesmen, returned to Finland in senior governmental and administrative positions, bringing with them some knowledge of Russian affairs and conditions that may have been of use to their homeland. Their appointments, though latterly unwelcome in Finnish quarters, deferred the placing of Russians in the Finnish administration until Russian nationalist pressure undoubtedly caused in Finland because influence as well as merit played a part in obtaining jobs for officers in Finland and because, at the end of the autonomy period, some were appointed because of their compliance towards Russian policy. Jac. Ahrenberg's novel *Vår landsman* (Our Countryman - a familiar way of referring to Finns in Russia), published in 1897, concluded with the hero, a Finnish colonel in Russian service, arranging through a grand duchess, an influential prince and the war minister for his appointment as director-general of the Finnish customs department, in spite of the proposal by the Finnish government of a better qualified candidate. The significance of this conclusion, in which the hero exchanged the officer's mess, the avenues and palaces of St Petersburg for the customs men, publicans and sinners in poor Finland, would not have been lost on the contemporary reader.¹³

In a sense the final consequence of the service of Finns as officers in Russia was the contribution such men made to the victory of the White Army in the Finnish Civil War of 1918. Not only Gustaf Mannerheim, the commander-in-chief, but other senior officers had gained experience in the Russian army

during the World War. Previously loyal to the Emperor, they helped after the Revolution to establish Finnish independence.

But there may have been a less obvious but important consequence of the service of Finns in Russia. At the beginning of the autonomy period there were fears in Finland of a possible decline in the upper class because of the lack of official posts to provide a livelihood for its members.¹⁴ The upper class was in any case small both in absolute numbers and in relation to the rest of the population - some 19,000 out of 1,177,000 in 1820. What would have happened to the Finnish upper class and to Finland

had the possibility of Russian service not existed when career opportunities at home were so severely limited? The fears felt in Finland might have been realised and a diminution of the upper class occurred, notably through emigration to Sweden, which would have affected the viability of the incipient Finnish state. It is true that service in the Russian army and navy involved not only the hazards of military life but also the risk of assimilation into Russian society. But if many Finnish officers died for the Empire or became russified, many - perhaps the majority - retained strong ties with Finland and were not irrevocably lost to their homeland.

Notes

1. For a fuller treatment of the subject of this article see J.E.O. Screen, *The entry of Finnish officers into Russian military service, 1809-1917*, University of London Ph.D. thesis, London, 1976.
2. On the Finnish armed forces and on Finns in Russian service see Jarl Gallén, 'La Finlande militaire au temps du Grand-Duché (1809-1917)', *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire*, no. 23, 1961, pp. 193-211.
3. The occupations of the upper class are discussed in Kaarlo Wirilander, *Herrarsväkeä. Suomen säätyläistö 1721-1870*, Helsinki, 1974 (*Historiallisia tutkimuksia*, 93).
4. There is a history of the Finnish Cadet Corps by G. A. Gripenberg, *Finska kadettkåren och dess kamratskap*, Helsingfors, 1912 (*Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland*, CVIII).
5. See J. E. O. Screen, 'Undersäte och medborgare: finländska officerare i rysk tjänst', *Historisk tidskrift för Finland (HTF)*, vol. 63, no. 1, 1978, pp. 21-29, and J.E.O. Screen, 'Närgra synpunkter på officersutbildningen i Ryssland och Finland under autonomins tid', *HTF*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1974, pp. 81-109. The latter

describes in general the arrangements for training Finns as officers.

6. On the Helsinki Yunker School see J.E.O. Screen, 'Helsingin Junkkarikoulu', *Sotilaisaikakauslehti*, vol. 54, no. 9, 1979, pp. 620-624.
7. For example, the National Archives of Finland has such material in its collection *Venäjän armeijassa palvelleet suomalaiset*.
8. Frans P. von Knorring, *Gamla Finland eller det fordna Wiborgska gouvernementet*, Åbo, 1833, p. 181.
9. P. O. von Törne, *Finlands Riddarhus 1818-1918*, II, Helsingfors, 1935, p. 269.
10. In *Uusi Suometar*, 6.VII.1877.
11. E. G. Palmén, 'Suomalaiset vieraan maan palveluksessa', *Oma maa. Tietokirja Suomen koidelle*, II, Porvoo, 1908, pp. 341-342.
12. I.I. Evropeus, 'Nikolai Nikolaevich Murav'ev', *Russkaya starina*, 1874, tom XI, pp. 183-184.
13. Jac. Ahrenberg, *Vår landsman*, Helsingfors, 1897. On the novel see Erik Ekelund, *Jac. Ahrenberg och östra Finland. En litteraturhistorisk studie med politisk bakgrund*, Helsingfors, 1943 (*Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland*, CCXCV), pp. 271-288.
14. Cf. Wirilander, *op. cit.*, p. 188, 190.

Suomalaiset upseerit Venäjän armeijassa ja laivastossa (1809-1917)

Vuoden 1809 jälkeen Suomen jouduttua Venäjän valtaan alkoi säätyläisiä mennä Venäjän armeijaan palvelemaan upseereina. Kannustimena tähän olivat toisaalta riittävän suurten sotajoukkojen puuttuminen Suomesta, toisaalta Suomeen aikaisemmin perustettu upseerien koulutuslaitos: Suomen kadettikoulu. Suomessa toimiva venäläinen varuskunta otti mielellään vastaan suomalaiset vapaaehtoiset potentiaalisina upseereina ja 1800-luvun alussa Suomen säätyläiset mielellään menivät Venäjän asepalvelukseen, koska Suomessa ei ollut saatavilla sopivaa työtä ja heitä auttoi periaate, jonka mukaan värväys perustui ennen 1860-lukua enemmän sosiaaliseen syntyperään kuin koulutukseen tai kykyihin.

Nikolai I hallituskaudella (1825-55) eräät venäläiset kadettikoulut järjestivät stipendejä suomalaisia varten, Suomen Kadettikoulua laajennettiin ja Junkkarikoulu perustettiin Helsinkiin erityistavoitteena opettaa mahdollisille suomalaisille upseereille venäjän kieltä. Näinä vuosina saavutti suomalaisten liittyminen Venäjän palvelukseen huippunsa. Selvä väheneminen alkoi 1860-luvulta lähtien kun sosiaaliset ja taloudelliset muutokset laajensivat mahdollisuuksia karriäärin tuomiseen ja kun nationalismin kasvu veti Suomea ja keisarikuntaa erilleen. Suomen hallitus ei enää halunnut auttaa suomalaisia palvelemaan venäläisinä upseereina ja sen muuttunut asenne oli syynä Helsingin Junkkarikoulun sulkemiseen vuonna 1879. Venäjän kansallismielinen politiikka sai aikaan Suomen Kadettikoulun sulkemisen vuonna 1909. Niinpä mahdollisuudet astua Venäjän palvelukseen supistuivat, samalla kun muut tekijät vähensivät suomalaisten

mielenkiintoa luoda sotilaallista tai laivastokarriäeriä keisarikunnassa.

Ehkä noin 4000 suomalaista palveli Venäjän armeijassa ja laivastossa upseereina ajanjaksona 1809-1917. Kiitos Suomen Kadettikoulun ja Venäjän kadettikoulujen stipendijärjestelmien monet suomalaiset nuoret miehet saivat parhaan mahdollisen upseerikoulutuksen armeijassa ja laivastossa. Suomalaiset toimivat useimmiten arvossa pidetyimmissä ja vaikutusvaltaisimmissa armeijan osastoissa: vartiointitehtävissä, tykistössä, yleisesikunnassa ja pioneereina. Suomalaisten suhteellinen osuus kenraali- ja amiraalikunnassa ylitti suomalaisten osuuden upseerikunnassa kokonaisuudessaan. Tämä oli heijastusta suotuisista olosuhteista, joiden aikana monet astuivat palvelukseen, yhtä hyvin kuin henkilökohtaisista kyvyistä.

Suomalaiset edustivat kyvykästä ja luotettavaa upseeriryhmää, jotkut heistä kunnostautuivat päällikköinä tai teknillisessä työssä. Joitakin suomalaisia upseereita oli nimitetty korkeaan asemaan Suomen hallituksessa ja hallinnossa, käytäntö joka ajan pitkään herätti katkeruutta, mutta kauan esti venäläisten nimittämisen sellaisiin virkoihin. Venäjän armeijassa palvelleet suomalaiset upseerit olivat avainasemassa Valkoisten joukoissa vuoden 1918 kansalaissodassa ja auttoivat tekemään Suomesta itsenäisen valtion. Kuitenkin ehkä tärkeämpi seuraus palveluksesta Venäjällä oli hankkia Suomen säätyläisille 1800-luvun ensimmäisellä puoliskolla toimeentulolähde, jota ilman olisi esiintynyt laajaa säätyläisten muuttoliikettä Ruotsiin, joka taas olisi vaikuttanut alkuasteella olevan Suomen valtion elinkykyyn. Synnyinmaa ei ollut lopullisesti menettänyt monia Venäjän armeijassa ja laivastossa palvelleita suomalaisia.