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Regional Histories and Historical Regions

The Concept of the Baltic Sea Region
in Polish and Swedish Historiographies

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EXTRACT

Introduction

Preface: History awakened to life

In May 2004 the European Union was enlarged by ten new countries, four of which lie on the shores of the Baltic Sea. At the same time an article entitled “The first European Union: The Hansa” was published in *National Geographic Polska*. The author of the article, Edward von der Porten, emphasised the role of the Hansa as a well-organised network of trade. “Not until the present day,” he wrote, “when the nations belonging to the Common Market, the predecessor of the European Union, obliged themselves to open the borders, create a common currency and unified market has the continent seen something similar.” This is an interesting comparison as it indicates a certain existing belief: that there is a feeling of unity based on common history in territories lying on the shores of the Baltic Sea, where the Hanseatic merchants used to travel and trade – a history which furthermore finds its parallels in present-day developments. This book is about the ways in which this basis of a common past, and the parallels drawn from it, have been presented and used by historians and writers of history in the Baltic Sea region in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

There are reasons for taking up this subject now. The enlargement of the European Union, as well as developing Baltic Sea co-operation, is in a way a result of processes that started with the fall of the communist block, which dramatically changed the political map of Eastern and Northern Europe. More than two decades have passed since the latter and almost one since the former, which means that while they remain current topics, they can now be regarded from a perspective allowing a reflection on these processes and their outcomes.

Waterways – seas and rivers – are often presented as connecting factors. Similarly, the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Iron Curtain that had cut across the Baltic Sea are considered as a return to this natural state and a renewed possibility to start co-operation between the sea’s opposite shores. With this possibility, a new interest in the region appeared among political and economic actors, as well as among scholars in various fields. It became easier to think about the region as a whole,

¹ E. von der Porten (2004): “Pierwsza Unia Europejska: Hanza.” In: *National Geographic Polska*, no. 5 (56), p. 5. All the translations from languages other than English in this book are by the author.

and popular to study the region in its various aspects. One of these aspects was its history.

Parallel to the political transformations of the 1980s and the early 1990s, new notions and ideas emerged, calling for a redefinition of historical concepts and a rewriting of historical narratives. A new historical perspective emerged that questioned notions of ‘we’ and ‘the others’, and expressed interest in the other shore of the sea and the common experiences that could be found there. In addition, a need arose to find – or build – a common historical identity. The result of all this was an enthusiasm for the idea of the Baltic Sea region, an idea which encompassed, besides political and economic co-operation, also common culture, identity and ideas. Not only historians, but also, for example, political scientists and geographers started to consider the past as a potential unifying idea for the Baltic Sea region. In this atmosphere of regional integration the view appeared, more or less explicitly expressed, that the moment had come, for the first time in the history of the region, when it was possible to write one historical narrative for the whole Baltic Sea region.

It is this concept of novelty of the common Baltic Sea region history, and the tension between it and the tendency to draw historical parallels – such as the one quoted above, between the European Union and the Hanseatic League – that demands particular exploration. The point of departure of this study is therefore the enthusiasm of the 1990s and the question of whether this approach to the Baltic Sea region as a unified whole with a common past is really something new, as some researchers suggest. Is the concept of the Baltic Sea region as a historical region something that became possible only after the disappearance of the Cold War’s divisions and the initiation of co-operation between Baltic Sea states? Or could it be traced back in time, and – if so – what transformations has the concept undergone? What caused and influenced these transformations?

Themes and methods

In the task of finding answers to these questions, comparison proves to be a useful tool, allowing to choose separate cases which, placed next to each other, may reveal something new and instructive about similarities and differences between them; especially bearing in mind that the view on the Baltic Sea region and its history differs depending on which side of the sea one looks from. This study presents views from two opposite shores, from both sides of the former Iron Curtain – or, to evoke divisions both older

and deeper than the Cold War,² views from two diametrically different social, political and historiographical traditions: a Scandinavian and a Central European perspective, or more precisely, a Swedish and a Polish one. At the same time, these two countries and their historiographies are comparable in the sense that, during the twentieth century, they both belonged to what can be called the middle league in the Baltic Sea region: neither dominant regional powers (although each of them has a history of having been one) like Germany and Russia (the Soviet Union), nor the smallest countries in the region, such as the Baltic States.

In terms of time, the period of post-Cold War enthusiasm, with all the political and conceptual changes brought about by the end of the world conflict, best demonstrates both its uniqueness and its continuity with the previous epochs when it is compared to another period of the twentieth century, of approximately the same length and sharing many of its features: the interwar period. Then, as today, there existed a number of smaller, independent states, initially without a dominant power (since the First World War had weakened both Germany and the Soviet Union). It was also the time when ideas of a Baltic Sea region co-operation and unity appeared.

The present study is, therefore, a comparative one: the comparison is both in space (between Poland and Sweden) and in time (between the interwar and the post-Cold War periods). It is, moreover, a study of concepts, or a history of concepts in the Baltic Sea region. According to German historian Reinhart Koselleck, analysing concepts, their meanings and changes throughout time can give us insight into historical processes.³ This argument stems from two important points: firstly, there is a difference between events and accounts of them – a historical narrative and the language in which it is written – but at the same time history is impossible without language, as this is the only way of experiencing the world and sharing this experience. Secondly, there can be no society or political action without common concepts. These concepts are, furthermore, constantly contested in social and political life. They always remain ambiguous, and thus need to be interpreted. This feature of concepts makes them – or rather, the ways of their interpretation – an object of political and

2 See e.g.: L. Wolff (1994): *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

3 R. Koselleck (1985): “Begriffsgeschichte and Social History.” In: R. Koselleck: *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p. 74; and: R. Koselleck (1985): “Neuzeit’: Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concepts of Movement.” In: *ibidem*, p. 231.

social competition, without which there could be no politics and no history. The history of concepts can thus be seen as an analysis of history as a struggle over the meanings ascribed to these concepts.

Such struggle has continued in the Baltic Sea region throughout the twentieth century. The historical narratives of the Baltic Sea region have been dynamic, evolving, responding to the changing political situation. They gave rise to a whole series of concepts – apart from that of the Baltic Sea region itself, several related or rival concepts emerged, such as *Norden*, the (New) Hansa, Baltic Europe and others, for which certain meanings and interpretations have been promoted as means of engaging them in a kind of ideological battle. This battle does not necessarily take the form of a real conflict: often it takes place in texts. Therefore, texts remain the focus of this study. Their analysis is guided by the following questions: What is the Baltic Sea region for historians? What are their views on history in general and the history of the Baltic Sea region in particular? How do they construct narratives about the past? What use do they see for their narratives, especially in the light of contemporary events? What influence do these contemporary events have on their writings on the history of the Baltic Sea region?

The main producers of texts on the history of the Baltic Sea region have been, of course, historians. However, history and historical arguments are not reserved for them: they appear not only in texts by researchers in other fields (e.g. political science) but also, and more importantly, in the writing of politicians. Historical discourse has often been close to politics, to the point of blurring the distinction between the two. On the one hand, many of the phenomena and tendencies present in historical writing can be explained by political and social processes; on the other, these writings often aspire to having an important influence on these processes themselves. The political discourse on the Baltic Sea region's past and contemporary co-operation thus becomes to some extent also a part of this story, as well as the research institutions and programmes within which historical research has been conducted, for example those produced by the Polish Baltic Institute.

To provide a comprehensive picture, two levels of analysis must be applied: synchronic and diachronic. The latter is an analysis of structures, long-term transformations, general tendencies and the sources of a concept. The former, on the other hand, refers to analysis of its semantic field; that is, it describes the concept in relation to its contemporaneous socio-political situation, as well as in relation to other concepts existing simul-

taneously.⁴ In other words, the study must include both the ways in which the concept of the Baltic Sea region and related concepts – such as the ones mentioned above – have developed over time, and how they have related to each other and to contemporary events and ideas.

This being a study on the use of concepts, some words about terminology should be said. Taking into consideration the double meaning of the term ‘Baltic’ in the English language, I use the expression ‘Baltic Sea’ to denote countries and phenomena relating to the sea and the region in general, while the term ‘Baltic States’ denotes three specific republics: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. It is, however, not possible – nor, in fact, useful – to give an exact definition of the Baltic Sea region for the purpose of this study: its goal is precisely to look for various definitions and meanings of the concept of the Baltic Sea region and related concepts used by those producing different narratives about the region’s past. The discussion around the definition and shape of the Baltic Sea region will therefore return as a recurring motif throughout this book.

The point of departure: the post-Cold War period

Post-Cold War enthusiasm: regionalism

The popularity of the study of the Baltic Sea region’s history since the early 1990s can be seen as a part of a broader process, which itself was the result of the political changes and developments in different areas of knowledge, including the study of regions.

The definition of ‘region’ has been the subject of ongoing discussion. Different aspects of the term can be stressed or omitted reflecting disciplinary perspectives of political science, social science, economy, geography, etc.⁵ In this case, it is the historian’s point of view that takes precedence. Definitions of ‘region’, however, are rarely the object of interest for

4 R. Koselleck (2002): “Social History and Conceptual History.” In: R. Koselleck: *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 29–30; and: R. Koselleck: “Begriffsgeschichte...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–85.

5 As shown for example in: P. Schmitt-Egner (2002): “The Concept of ‘Region’: Theoretical and Methodological Notes on its Reconstruction.” In: *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 179–200.