



## BOOKS ON THE BALTIC REGION: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CONTENT OF ITS HISTORY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF ITS CONCEPT

*Geschichte, Politik und Kultur im Ostseeraum* (The Baltic Sea Region: Northern Dimensions – European Perspectives, Bd. 12). Hrsg. von Jan HECKEL-STAMPEHL, Bernd HENNINGSEN. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2012. – 252 S. ISBN 978-3-8305-1768-9

GRZECHNIK, Marta. *Regional Histories and Historical Regions. The Concept of the Baltic Sea Region in Polish and Swedish Historiographies* (Geschichte, Erinnerung, Politik. Poesener Studien zur Geschichts-, Kultur- und Politikwissenschaft, Bd. 3). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012. – 186 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-63172-0; ISSN 2191-3528

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The concept of the *Baltic Region* has been discussed for more than a decade. Historians who not so long ago tended to ask what unites the region, and what could 'fill' the content of its history, have lately been increasingly frequently asking how the concept of the *Baltic Region* and the feeling of belonging to the region were constructed. The appearance of two books published in Germany in 2012 presents a good chance to juxtapose the two trends.

The first book 'History, Politics, and Culture in the Baltic Sea Region' is a collection of articles, which contains 11 presentations given during a series of lectures organised in the winter semester of the academic year 2008/2009 by the Nordic Institute of Humboldt University in Berlin. Both editors of the collection are historians at the university, one of whom, Bernd Henningsen, is also the founder of the Nordic Institute. In the introduction, they note modestly that most aspects laid out in the collection ask for a more thorough analysis. Indeed, the Baltic Region is presented in the collection in general terms: some articles cover several centuries, in which some processes are either just superficially touched on or totally neglected. Perhaps because of this, some statements, such as Hans Hecker's reasons for the roots of the dislike for Russia in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (pp. 121–122), or his attempts to present the actions of the rulers of Muscovy in the 15th and 16th centuries as a consistent 'march towards the Baltic' (p. 123), sound, at the very least, controversial. On the other hand, it would seem that the book is not an effort to provide answers to all questions, or to present

a consistent panorama of historical events in the region. In fact, in a positive sense, one is surprised by the abundance of approaches revealed in the collection, and the diversity of periods, starting with environmental history, military history, and *Begriffsgeschichte* (the history of concepts), and finishing with research into contacts and cultural transfers, ranging from the subject of the Christianisation of the region in the Viking Age to the realities of the Second World War and the postwar period, as well as of the last few decades. The collection also takes a multi-sided perspective thanks to the international team of authors, including researchers who have been reflecting for some time on the past of the region. In this sense, it will first of all perform its function as a guidebook for those wanting to deepen their knowledge of what David Kirby, one of the authors, once called 'the Baltic world'.<sup>1</sup> The target audience of the book, given that all the articles are in German, except for one in English, should apparently first of all be students at German universities. This orientation of the collection ought, in a way, to justify the fact that some of the material included in the collection was already published in the authors' monographs (Hansjörg Küster) or articles (Jörg Hackmann). Therefore, the collection is original not so much because of the material presented in it, but because it unites a variety of approaches to the past of the region. It covers aspects of politics, diplomacy, conflict, religion, art, science and natural history.

The second book is a monograph by Marta Grzechnik, who is currently working at Gdańsk University in Poland. It was published in English at the European University Institute in Florence, on the basis of her PhD thesis defended in 2010. The book offers a totally different approach to the collection of articles discussed above. In the introduction, Grzechnik introduces her study as a comparative history, both in space (between Poland and Sweden) and time (between the interwar period and the post-Cold War period). She examines the works of historians and their links with political realities, and in this respect the study belongs to the popular trend of the politics of history. Grzechnik analyses a phenomenon she defines as 'the enthusiasm about the history of the Baltic Sea region', and in the introduction she argues that, just after the Cold War, the enthusiasm for identification with the space was a consequence of trends in regionalism, accompanied by trends in historiography. On the basis of this argument, the author, in short, shows that, in the interwar period, the maritime discourse and the search for one's own place in the Baltic region were relevant to Poland, and hardly relevant to Sweden, while after the Cold War, on the contrary, the Baltic discourse started to circulate increasingly widely in Sweden, but received a limited response in Poland. There, in the interwar period, the discourse was mainly provoked by the 'marriage with the sea' (*zaślubiny Polski z morzem*), by what was called *walka o Pomorze* (the fight for Pomerania), and by the activity of the Baltic Insti-

<sup>1</sup> KIRBY, David. *The Baltic World 1772-1993. Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change*. London, New York, 1995. True, David Kirby was not the only 'author' of the concept; in 1994, the same concept was used by Matti Klinge in the title of his book: KLINGE, Matti. *Östersjövärlden*. Helsingfors, 1994.

tute established in Toruń in 1925, which was partly directed towards Poland's claims to legitimate its access to the sea.<sup>2</sup> In Sweden after the Cold War, the 'enthusiasm' in historiography for the Baltic region was mainly provoked by the aspiration of historians to join the international trend in constructing new regional histories. That was the outcome of the political realities at the time, and the hopes for regional integration and cooperation, particularly relating to the three 'Baltic states', which had freed themselves from the clutches of the USSR. Marta Grzechnik's study is a significant and unquestionable contribution to the issue of the development of the *Baltic region* concept over the last century, not least because it undeniably highlights the trends which predominated in two states: Poland and Sweden.

Simultaneously, the subject of the study, and of some of the articles included in the collection mentioned above which also address the content of the *Baltic region* concept (Jörg Hackmann), and raise the issue of Russia's belonging to the region (Hans Hecker), allow us to discern a certain more general trend which has been emerging in historiography for more than a decade: attempts to deconstruct the concept of the *Baltic region*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Over the last decade, the current aspect has been studied increasingly intensively, cf. TROEBST, Stefan. „Intermarium“ und „Vermählung mit dem Meer“: Kognitive Karten und Geschichtspolitik in Ostmitteleuropa. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 2002, 28. Jhg., Hf. 3, S. 435-469; KRZOSKA, Markus. *Für ein Polen an Oder und Ostsee. Zygmunt Wojciechowski (1900–1955) als Historiker und Publizist*. Osnabrück, 2003; HACKMANN, Jörg. „Zugang zum Meer“: Die Ostsee in der polnischen Historiografie. *NORDEUROPAforum*, 2004/2, S. 43-66; BRIESEWITZ, Gernot. *Raum und Nation in der polnischen Westforschung 1918–1948. Wissenschaftsdiskurse, Raumdeutungen und geopolitische Visionen im Kontext der deutsch-polnischen Beziehungsgeschichte*. Osnabrück, 2014; GRZECHNIK, Marta. Intermarium: The Baltic and the Black Seas on the Polish Mental Maps in the Interwar Period. *Revista Română de Studii Baltice și Nordice*, 2014, vol. 6, issue 6, pp. 81-96.

<sup>3</sup> Early examples: HACKMANN, Jörg. From “Object” to “Subject”: The contribution of small nations to region-building in North Eastern Europe. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2002, vol. 33, issue 4, pp. 412-430 (an updated version in German: Vom Objekt zum Subjekt. Kleine Nationen als konstituierender Faktor der Geschichte Nordosteuropas. In *Nordosteuropa als Geschichtsregion. Beiträge des III. Internationalen Symposiums zur deutschen Kultur und Geschichte im europäischen Nordosten vom 20.-22. September 2001 in Tallinn (Estland)*. Hrsg. von Jörg HACKMANN, Robert SCHWEITZER. Helsinki, Lübeck, 2006, S. 458-783); LEHTI, Marko. Mapping the study of the Baltic Sea area: From nation-centric to multinational history. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2002, vol. 33, issue 4, pp. 412-430; BRÜGGEMANN, Karsten. Leaving the ‘Baltic’ States and ‘Welcome to Estonia’: Re-regionalising Estonian Identity. *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire*, 2003, vol. 10, issue 2, pp. 343-360, especially pp. 348-352; HACKMANN, Jörg. Was bedeutet „baltisch“? Zum semantischen Wandel des Begriffs im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. In *Buch und Bildung im Baltikum. Festschrift für Paul Kaegbein zum 80. Geburtstag* (Schriften der Baltischen Historischen Kommission, Bd. 13). Hrsg. von Heinrich BOSSE, Otto-Heinrich ELIAS, Robert SCHWEITZER. Münster, 2005, S. 15-39; ENGELN, Hilde. Die Konstruktion der Ostseeregion: Akteure, mentale Landkarten und ihr Einfluss auf die Entstehung einer Region. In *Die Ordnung des Raums. Mentale Landkarten in der Ostseeregion* (The Baltic Sea Region: Northern Dimensions - European Perspectives, Bd. 6). Hrsg. von Norbert GÖTZ, Jörg HACKMANN, Jan HECKER-STAMPEHL. Berlin, 2006, S. 61-92; TROEBST, Stefan. Von Braudel zu Klinge: Geschichtsregionale Konzeptionen als implizite und explizite Konstrukte. In *Finnland und Deutschland. Studien zur Geschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburger Beiträge zur Geschichte des östlichen Europa, Bd. 17). Hrsg. von Bernd WEGNER, Oliver von WROCHEM, Daniel SCHÜMMER. Hamburg 2009, S. 96-105. On that subject, a new collection of articles is to appear soon: *Das Baltikum als gelehrtes und literarisches Konstrukt. Von einer Kolonialwahrnehmung zu einem nationalen Diskurs (18. bis 19. Jahrhundert)*. Hrsg. von Anne SOMMERLAT. Würzburg, 2015.

What predetermines the construction of the *Baltic region* concept and seeing oneself in that region, one's own identification with the region? Do objective links that unite the region really exist, or are these links just 'inventions' dictated by specific intentions, to which historians have substantially contributed? And in that case, to what degree, subject to the political situation, and how long-lasting can the very concept of the *Baltic region* be?

Jörg Hackmann's article once again demonstrates the problematic character of the concept, and the context of its development, as well as the fact that their identification with the region by the cultural elites in the countries around the Baltic Sea in the 19th and 20th centuries was dictated by specific conditions. The study by Marta Grzechnik, which basically develops this theme, reveals how the specific (geo)political realities in Poland and Sweden in the last century made one reconsider the concepts of both belonging to the region and of the very region. Hans Hecker's article raises the question whether the considerations of Russia on its belonging or not belonging to the Baltic region were not dictated basically by the need to legitimate its power policy, as has been demonstrated by Karsten Brüggemann<sup>4</sup> on the basis of the examples of the mid-19th century?

All these issues and shifts, to paraphrase the idea of Marta Grzechnik, may possibly just be a consequence of the too ineffective 'enthusiasm for the Baltic'. However, by provoking a critical approach to the 'Baltic discourse', they may provide answers to much broader questions about the societies living around the *Baltic region*. The deconstruction of the latter concept can do more than just reveal the changes in the treatment of these societies and in their self-representation. Simultaneously, they can make us reconsider the issue whether such a region actually exists, and whether it is united by any contacts other than those of communication and trade, with the Hansa that was traditionally regarded as their quintessence, which have traditionally been the focus of typical Baltic region histories.

<sup>4</sup> BRÜGGEMANN, Karsten. Das Baltikum im russischen Blick: Rußland und sein Anspruch auf die baltischen Staaten in der Perspektive des 19. Jahrhunderts. In *Nordosteuropa als Geschichtsregion...*, S. 392-411.