



*Das Baltikum als Konstrukt (18.–19. Jahrhundert). Von einer Kolonialwahrnehmung zu einem nationalen Diskurs.* Hrsg. von Anne SOMMERLAT-MICHAS. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015. – 264 S. ISBN 978-3-8260-5422-8

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The establishment of Medieval Christian culture in the east Baltic region determined distinct cultural experiences for several centuries to come. Initially, they relied on contacts between those who disseminated Christianity and those for whom it was intended. They were subsequently transformed into contacts between the social and cultural elite and the 'indigenous' peasants. Further changes were mostly stimulated by the ideas of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, and the ideas of the Enlightenment and nationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. What was the impact of the latter on the understanding of the local elites of what kind of region they lived in? A collection of articles edited by Anne Sommerlat-Michas offers an insight into this issue, by taking us back to the changes in the 18th and the 19th centuries, defined by the subtitle of the volume as a transition 'from the colonial perception towards a national discourse'.

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The editor of the volume, a historian of literature and culture, published an excellent book in 2010 on the Age of Enlightenment in Courland.<sup>1</sup> It provides a horizontal look at the Republic of Letters in the Duchy (than part of the Commonwealth of Two Nations) at the time: internal networking, institutions, topics of debate, the approach to the lower strata of society, and the political context, and finally, through the genre of travel literature, an 'external' evaluation of society. Her analysis of the intellectual activity of the erudites in the region must have led Sommerlat-Michas to the topic of these thematic articles. Most of the authors brought together here examine the discourse of the (predominantly German-speaking) elites, and through it try to understand how they perceived themselves, their region, and the 'others' who lived in the region.

In the introduction, the editor suggests reading the 14 articles that make up the book, based on presentations at a conference in Amiens in 2013, as a quaternary structure. Part One, considered as an introduction, discusses 'imaginary projections and cross-cultural constructs in the Baltic Sea region'. The essay by the historian Jörg Hackmann dealing with the genesis of the specific German term *Baltikum*, whose basic arguments are known from the previously published texts, is complemented by York-Gothart Mix's assumptions, which are presented as an introduction to his research project, and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink's paper, offering a discursive analysis of regional historiography at the turn of the 19th century. These are followed by

<sup>1</sup> SOMMERLAT, Anne. *La Courlande et les Lumières*. Paris, 2010.

four articles raising 'issues of linguistic reflection, language history, and language policy'. The contributions by Stephan Kessler, Maris Saagpakk, Anne Sommerlat-Michas and Aiga Šemeta can be read consistently, possibly due to the fact that all the authors use similar approaches and discuss basically the same issue: the role of language in the establishment of the 'colonial' self-perception of the elites, and their approach to Estonian and Latvian-speaking people. Part Three consists of four articles united by the choice to examine certain works of literature. By covering a very wide period of time, from the mid-18th to the early 20th century, they demonstrate how various authors writing in German and Latvian behaved in a situation dissociating two communication milieus: from indifference towards each other (Michel Grimberg), to an attempt to bridge the gap between othernesses (Māra Grudule, Klaus Schenk, Liina Lukas). In Part Four, the authors again go back to the issue of the self-perception of the German-speaking regional elite. Jürgen Joachimstaler in his paper raises the issue of the existence of a 'Polish gap' in the cultural memory of the 'Baltic Germans' in the regions that had previously been part of the Commonwealth of Two Nations. René-Marc Pille transfers the reader from self-evaluation in the 'Poland' perspective to how the 'Baltic Germans' established in the memory their participation in the first Russian marine expeditions around the world. The closing paper by Matthias Müller somewhat falls out of the general context by moving to the 'debates on luxury' that took place in the governorates of Reval and Riga in the 1780s: as is noted in the introduction, the discussion is intended to look at the 'mentality of the Baltic Germans'. Overall, the papers in the collection by historians and researchers into literature, culture and communication create a panorama of the self-image of the educated social strata.

As is mentioned above, the whole approach in the collection of papers is summarised in two alternatives in the self-perception of the 'Baltic Germans' and their relations with 'others': the colonisers versus the indigenous peoples and nations in relation to other nations. In the introduction, the purposefulness of the use of the colonial approach to the region was justified by the self-perception of contemporaries. Apparently, in the same way, by appealing to the categories used by contemporaries, the use of the concepts of 'nation' and 'national discourse' in the collection should be understood. However, the question of whether that kind of presentation helps the contemporary reader to properly understand the situation remains to be discussed. The circulation of the colonial self-perception among the 'Baltic Germans' has been witnessed by other authors over recent years.<sup>2</sup> But did a national self-perception

<sup>2</sup> PLATH, Ulrike. *Esten und Deutsche in den baltischen Provinzen Russlands: Fremdheitskonstruktionen, Kolonialphantasien und Lebenswelten 1750–1850* (Veröffentlichungen des Nordost-Instituts, Bd. 11). Wiesbaden, 2011; KLÖKER, Martin. *Koloniales Modell und regionale Literatur. Die deutsch-livländischen Literaturbeziehungen der Frühen Neuzeit*. In *Die baltischen Länder und Europa in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Quellen und Studien zur baltischen Geschichte, Bd. 26). Hrsg. von Norbert ANGERMANN, Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, Inna PÖLTSAM-JÜRJO. Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2015, S. 37–66.

also circulate in their milieu? Given the fact that by its chronological boundaries the volume basically just enters the earliest stage of the formation of national movements in the east Baltic region, the postulation of the 'national discourse' as one of the alternatives of self-perception would apparently at least demand a broader explanation in the introduction.

A volume which in its title emphasises the constructionist nature of the term *Baltikum*, and which was written by people who are well aware of the character of the discourse analysis, raises the expectation of somewhat greater attention to concepts. This is particularly important when talking about the epoch covered by the collection of papers, during which a lot of changes in spatial awareness and self-evaluation took place in the self-awareness of the population of the east Baltic region.<sup>3</sup> However, the expectation remains partly unfulfilled: many authors, apparently out of inertia, continue writing generally about 'Baltic Germans'. A single paper by Hackmann is essentially devoted to the very construct of *Baltikum*. All the other authors in the volume focus on the development of different aspects of self-perception taking place in the region named by that construct; however, they do not touch on the issue of its construction. Meanwhile, when reading the collection, the thought never left my mind that, through the use of the term, a premature attempt to summarise all the possible regional concepts of elites was made, since attention to their disclosure in the collection is not so obvious. Thus, for example, I would put forward the hypothesis that the spatial concepts and the self-perception of the local elites must have essentially been influenced by at least one important thing. By this, I mean the fact that the future governorates of Lifliandii (Livonia) and Estliandii (Estonia), former holdings of the Swedish king, became part of Russia as early as during the Great Northern War. Meanwhile, the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, part of the Commonwealth of Two Nations from the 16th century, came under Romanov rule only after the last partition of the Commonwealth in 1795. In the Governorate of Kurliandii, formed in 1796, the authorities of the Empire treated the aristocracy who concentrated political control in their hands in very much the same manner as had already been applied to the two northern governorates, while in 1801–1876, the three governorates formed one General Governorate. However, was it enough for the levelling and consolidation of the spatial concepts of the intellectual elites of the three governorates? Differences between Lifliandii and Estliandii on one hand, and Kurliandii on the other, due to its late annexation by Russia, did exist at a certain level. Some of the papers seem to claim that in the former land of the Commonwealth of Two Nations, the self-evaluation of elite social groups developed based on other starting points. However, this interesting issue has not been explained in

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the analysis of the situation in Lithuania: SAFRONOVAS, Vasilijus. *The Creation of National Spaces in a Pluricultural Region: The Case of Prussian Lithuania*. Boston, MA, 2016; *Spatial Concepts of Lithuania in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Ed. by Darius STALIŪNAS. Boston, MA, 2016.

the collection at all, even though the title and the period investigated would allow us to expect it. Therefore, we have hardly advanced any further on the issue than was stated over 20 years ago:

Allen Versuchen der deutschen Bewohner, den Provinzen [Estland, Kurland, and Livland – V. S.] einen gemeinsamen Namen zu verleihen, wie etwa „Baltenland“ oder „Balten“ oder „baltische Lande“ (schon 1864), blieb eine allgemeine Anerkennung versagt. Mehr Erfolg war den Ausdrücken Baltikum und – als wissenschaftlicher Begriff – Ostbaltikum beschieden, der Form nach substantivierte Adjektive. Für die dort siedelnden Deutschen setzte sich zur genaueren Begriffsbestimmung *vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* [italics mine – V. S.] die Bezeichnung Deutschbalten durch, wohl um den verpönten Ausdruck „Deutschrussen“, der in Deutschland in Gebrauch gekommen war, zu verdrängen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> MÜHLEN, Heinz von zur. Livland von der Christianisierung bis zum Ende seiner Selbständigkeit (etwa 1180–1561). In *Baltische Länder* (Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas, [Bd. 3]). Hrsg. von Gert von PISTOHLKORS. Berlin, 1994, S. 28–29.