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A “RUSSIAN STAPLE” IN LÜBECK’S TRADING STRATEGY AT
THE EARLY MODERN TIME

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Abstract

The article presents a program for the preservation and expansion of Hanseatic League privileges in Russia. Being in a difficult economic and political situation, Lübeck was interested not only in preserving the old markets, but also in expanding its trading activity. The shifting the centre of the international trade at the Baltic Sea (staple) in some of the Russian cities could simultaneously contribute to the preservation of the old Hanseatic trade system. The original text of a previously unknown letter of Lübeck to the citizens of Reval in 1571 from the Tallinn City Archives contains the first detailed mention of the “Russian Staple” in Ivangorod or Pskov and its characteristics: self-government, duty-free trade and guarantees of free transportation and export of goods from the Russian government. Pskov acted initially as the basis for the implementation of the program, because a trading post (Lübecker Hof) was established there. In the future, using the favor of the tsars Fedor Ioannovich and Boris Godunov to the Hansa, Lübeck tried by way of diplomacy to achieve the duty-free trade and to expand the network of its trading establishments in Russia. All the same, a small reflection of Russian affairs in the documents of the Hanseatic congresses (Hansetag) from the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries testifies to the fact that they were considered internal affairs of Lübeck. Therefore, it is possible to raise the question of an attempt to monopolize the Russian trade by Lübeck or to create its own hinterland in Russia.

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Keywords: Hanseatic League, Lübeck, Pskov, “Russian staple”, Veliky Novgorod



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1. Introduction

In the second half of the 16th century, the process of the medieval Hanseatic system destruction ended. This period was accompanied by the disappearance or decline in the activity of the Hanseatic Kontore outside the Hanseatic space and staples as places of authorized exchange of goods, the localization of the commercial interests of the Hanseatic cities (or their groups), their autonomization and, as a consequence, the fragmentation of the Hanseatic space and a loss of the prestige of Lübeck as the capital of the Hansa (*caput omnium*). The decline of Bruges, superseded by Antwerp, the entry of Dutch, British and southern German merchants in the Baltic market, the anti-Hanseatic policy of the Danish, English and Swedish rulers, the consequences of the Age of Discoveries, the onslaught on the communal freedoms of the Hanseatic cities by the Low German rulers, confessional division at the Reformation times (Hammel-Kiesow, 2000; Hoffmann, 2008; Iwanov, 2016; Postel, 2006; Selzer, 2012). Lübeck made attempts to resolve the situation by expanding the geography of its enterprise, in particular, through trade with Russia. Western Europe needed Russian exports – wax, leather, tallow, flax, hemp, etc., the volumes of which were steadily increasing. In the trading strategy of Lübeck of 16th–17th centuries, there is the intention to use the traditions of the “Russian Hansa” in order to reach key position in trade with Russia. The successes at Narva during the Livonian War and the development of British trade in the White Sea also.

In the context of the collapse of the traditional Hanseatic “network structure” (Netzwerk) with a specific, complex, overall web of personal connections between international trade participants (Jahnke, 2014) and its replacement by the confederate community of cities, it became very important for each Hanseatic city to have and expand its own hinterland, which supplied them with export products due to the commercial connections based on daily and contractual practice. The need was explained by the predominance of agricultural and forestry products, raw materials and semi-finished goods in the range of the Baltic international trade, and, as it was well shown by the examples of Danzig (Gdansk) (Link, 2016) and Riga (Doroshenko, 1985), the presence of hinterland in the port city had a positive effect on its trade. As for Lübeck, its hinterland (*marchi civitatis*) was small and the city managed to provide large profits and prestige for a long time due to its location at the trade crossroads between Western, Northern and Eastern Europe, privileges, city property, freight, control over Hanseatic Kontore and staples, jurisdictions in the area of Lübeck law (Jahnke, 2017). However, with the Modern Age, the effectiveness of these factors weakened and the problem of export resources in the Lübeck trade strategy became obvious.

The activation of Russian trade in Lübeck was hampered by the cooperation of Livonian cities, mainly Reval (Tallinn) as the main “Novgorod staple” and Dorpat (Tartu), closely connected with Pskov (Angermann, 1995). The Livonian cities were the main platform for the Russian-Hanseatic trade with a guaranteed supply of Russian goods and their citizens, included in the Hanseatic “network”, ensured their flow to Western European markets. Reval and Dorpat represented the Hansa in diplomatic relations with Russia and were the subjects of the Russian-Hanseatic agreements, responsible for their implementation. Only from the middle of the 16th century, Lübeck began to show interest in dialogue with the Russian government. The reasons were the weakening of business activity in the Novgorod Kontor of the Hansa (German Courtyard) (Angermann, 2002), the “guest policy” of Livonian cities, which hampered mutual trade of foreign “guests” (Tiberg, 1995), and the disassociation of Reval and Narva due to their transfer to

Sweden. Dorpat was incorporated by Polish Inflanty and became a part of the Riga's hinterland (Doroshenko, 1985). The changes in the fate of Livonian cities allowed Lübeck to step aside from the traditional regulation of Russian-Hanseatic relations with the involvement of three Livonian "communes" and to form its own strategy aimed at finding a new staple through which the Russian export would have flown, and expanding its hinterland at the expense of the Russian North-West territory. The traditional alternative to trade without Livonian cooperation for the cities of the "overseas" Hansa was the use of the German Courtyard in Veliky Novgorod, but after its restoration in 1514 (the German Courtyard was closed by order of Grand Duke Ivan III in 1494) Reval claimed key positions in its administration (Bessudnova, 2019). Moreover, the German Courtyard, as the Hansa Kontor, was open to all Hanseatic people, who enjoyed equal privileges, so this also prompted the magistrate of Lübeck to make plans to organize their own trading courts.

2. Problem Statement

The focus of the research is the little-studied problem of reorganization of the traditional "network" (Werknetz) structure of the Hansa during the crisis of the 16th – early 17th centuries and its transition to a confederate organization. This process is illustrated by the example of the capital of the Hansa – Lübeck – that intended to retain its leadership in changed circumstances. The means to achieve the goal, in particular, was the implementation of the idea of the "Russian staple" through the establishment of direct diplomatic contacts of Lübeck with the Russian rulers and the acquisition of royal awards. The result was the creation of a network of Lübeck trading courts in Russian trading cities, its dominant position in the sphere of Russian-German trade and the expansion of its hinterland at the expense of the Russian North-West territory.

3. Research Questions

The stated problem requires analysis of the preventive stage of Lübeck's diplomatic activity at the turn of the 16th–17th centuries, related with the development of the concept of the "Russian staple" in 1571 in the context of a competitive struggle for participation in the "Narva campaign". We should also characterize the main provisions of this concept and consider their phased implementation during the Lübeck diplomatic missions of 1586–1587 and 1603. It is also important to establish the fundamental differences between the "staple" policy of Lübeck at the turn of the 16th–17th centuries and the Hanseatic tradition and estimate the significance of its results.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study expands the incomplete idea of the Hansa transformation mechanism as a community of Low German trading cities at the last stage of its existence. The analysis of Lübeck's diplomatic contacts with Russia in 1586–1603 and the trade privileges granted to it by the Russian rulers, allows us to define in them not only the premises for optimizing Russian-Hanseatic relations, which had been repeatedly mentioned in historical literature, but also the important factor of reformatting intra-Hanseatic structures

during the disintegration of the “network” system and the formation of the Hanseatic confederation, in which Lübeck managed to maintain a leading position.

5. Research Methods

Along with numerous studies that help to present the historical context of the topic and identify the range of research problems, this study uses a number of documentary evidence from foreign archives. Based on the Lübeck pamphlet “A Brief Message ...” of 1571, the program for the formation of a “Russian staple” was recreated, while unpublished documents from the Archives of the Hanseatic City of Lübeck (Archiv der Hansestadt Lübeck) concerning the diplomatic mission of Zechariah Meyer in 1586–1587 and the Hanseatic embassy in Moscow in 1603, allows us to claim the phased implementation of the project and its undoubted success. Moreover, archival materials provide arguments to speak of the special model of the Lübeck courts in Russian cities, which in their structure and purpose are fundamentally different from the traditional Hanseatic staples.

6. Findings

Lübeck merchants in the first half of the 16th century had direct access to Russian trade in Novgorod and Pskov and from the beginning of the “Narva campaign” (1558), the Lübeck magistrate insisted on their free access to Narva, which was opposed by Poland and Sweden with the support of Reval (Köhler, 2000). During this confrontation, the idea of a “Russian staple” was created, initiated by the magistrate of Lübeck. It is set out in the proclamation “A Brief Narrative and Information of the Hanseatic People about [their] Original Free Sailing, Business and Trade in Livonia and Russia” (*Kürtzer Bericht undt Information der hansischen von alters her auf Lieflandt und Rußlandt gebrauchter Sigillation, gewerb undt hantirung*), which was found in the collections of the Tallinn City Archives (TLA, 230, BD 27, fol. 1v. – 2r.). The document was created in 1571 by order of the Lübeck magistrate shortly after the end of the Northern Seven Years’ War of 1563–1570 and contained wishes to Reval, which embassy, as it was supposed, was soon to participate in the Russian-Swedish negotiations. In the interests of the Hansa, Reval had to take advantage of the contact with the Russian side in order to raise the issue of establishing a Hanseatic staple on Russian territory, in “Russian Narva” (Ivangorod) or another city. Then they planned to ask the tsar for the free movement and trade of the Hanseatic people with Russian merchants in Livonia (“country”), part of which was occupied by Russian troops, and Pskov. Moreover, they hoped to persuade him to free the Hanseatic merchants from duties and other requisitions in the places of their trade with the Russians and secure guarantees for the supply of Russian goods there, first of all, wax, and their unimpeded export (Bessudnova, 2017). Thus, it was about a well-thought-out strategy, the basis of which was the idea of the Hanseatic staple, which could provide Lübeck with direct access to the Russian market. We have no evidence pointing to Ivan IV’s acquaintance with this project, although in his policy of the 1570s the desire to develop Russian-Hanseatic trade was obvious (Angermann, 2003; Horoshkevich, 2011; Köhler, 2000). It is possible that the Russian autocrat’s favorable disposition towards the Hanseatic merchants cherished the hopes of the Lübeck people for the success of their wishes.

Ivangorod in the role of the “Russian staple” was not attractive to Lübeck at first, perhaps due to the impossibility of promoting the normalization of its relations with Reval, at the same time Pskov was often mentioned in the sources as a main option. Despite the hardships of the Livonian War, Pskov continued international trade, the volume of which by the end of the 16th century significantly exceeded the indicators of Veliky Novgorod that suffered from the consequences of the oprichnina massacre (Angermann, 2004). In about 1574, the German Courtyard was restored in Pskov, replacing the first one founded in 1530 and burnt down in a fire in 1560 (Angermann, 2004). The traveler Samuel Kihel, who visited the Courtyard in 1586, left a description of it, noting the predominance of Lübeck people among its inhabitants (Kiechel, 1866). Participation in the life of the Pskov German Courtyard provided Lübeck with an opportunity to evade Dorpat’s “guest” prohibitions, according to which merchants from other Hanseatic cities were not allowed to enter Pskov, and to leave aside the Livonian cities, dependent on Sweden or Poland and not too friendly with the Hansa.

The first stage of the arrangement of Lübeck merchants on Russian soil in the first half of the 16th century is associated with the German Courtyards of Novgorod and Pskov. If taking into account the proclamation of 1571, it is clear that Lübeck was striving to provide its merchants with privileges, which were an obligatory attribute of the Hanseatic staple, and for this purpose to organize a number of embassies in Moscow. The end of the Livonian War and the legalization of international Baltic trade gave the Hanseatic cities the opportunity to resume trade with Novgorod and Pskov, which were almost destroyed during the war. Thus, Lübeck had a reason to start a diplomatic dialogue with Moscow on behalf of the entire Hansa. In reality, however, the “gentlemen” (*Herren*) of Lübeck aimed at creating a fundamentally different system of Russian-German trade relations that focused on the needs of Lübeck, leaving Livonian cities behind. Its main element was to create a network of Lübeck trading Courtyards in Russian cities, primarily in Novgorod and Pskov. The second key element was to be the same “shell of Hanseatic privileges” that once made the Hansa the commercial capital of the Baltic Sea (Puhle, 2006), but then these privileges were exclusively addressed to Lübeck. And third one: the Russian ruler became the guarantor of this system, and not on the basis of an agreement, as in the days of Novgorod and Pskov independence, but according to Moscow custom – as a result of the royal favor.

At the Lübeck Hansetag in October–November 1584, it was decided to send a message to Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich with a request to establish a Courtyard for Hanseatic merchants who traded in Russia (Kölner Inventar, 1903). In 1586–1587, Zachariya Meyer, the Lübeck city councilor, paid official visits to Moscow. On April 23, 1586, at the behest of Tsar Fyodor Ioannovich, he was awarded a charter for “all 72 overseas [Hanseatic] cities” for trade “as in the old days” (*na denn oldenn*) in Novgorod and Pskov (Dopolnenija, 1848, № 88). In Meyer’s report, which includes the German texts of the treaty and Tsar’s messages to the Novgorod governors, the appointment of the new Courtyard was indicated in plain text: “Let them find and prepare a Courtyard for the Lübeck people, so that the guest Courtyard would be mainly for Lübeck, and whatever Lübeck merchants would come to Novgorod, let them trade in this Courtyard. And let them appoint one respectable foreman (*eddelman*), and make sure that the Lübeck people do not have any oppression and trouble from ours. And you must charge half the tax from the Lübeck merchants in comparison with other nations; from Germans, Livonians, Swedes, Danes and Lithuanians collect the full tax. According to our next order, we command to build a Courtyard for the Lübeck people from our

treasury on the place where the Courtyard was before, with a stone house, whatever it costs, so that the Lübeck merchants could get their courtyard ready; and protect the Lübeck in everything so that no one will harm them, please” (Ruthenica, n.d. d). In the Novgorod scribal book of 1588–1589, it is also noted that “now that courtyard was set up by a German Lübeck merchant” (Majkov, 1912). *Predominance* of Lübeck merchants in the Novgorod German Courtyard at the turn of the 16th–17th centuries became the reason of naming it as Lübeck Courtyard (Angermann, 2002).

The German Courtyard in Pskov, which was rebuild in 1586 as well (Graßmann, 1996), was also made exclusively for the people of Lübeck: “Special Courtyard in Pskov is only for you [Lübeck]”, built by citizens (*inwaners*) (Ruthenica, n.d. e). Merchants from Lübeck were also given freedom of trade, opportunity to pay taxes “in half” (*up de heffie*), protection from oppression, although the latter privilege extended to all Germans who “come to Pskov with goods from Narva or Ivangorod or from other German cities” (Ruthenica, n.d. f). The latter stayed at the old German Courtyard and were not satisfied with the new commercial one (Ruthenica, n.d. h). The city authorities also did not like this idea apparently too much, and therefore they placed the Lübeck Courtyard not in the city, in Zapskovje (*Zabschow*), but “beyond the river”, in Zavelichje, in “out of the way” (*gar am ende der sreydt*) (Ruthenica, n.d. j), and they did not build it anew, but took the house of Yuri Igolkin (*Jurgen Igolken*) (Ruthenica, n.d. i).

In the royal charter of 1586, it was mentioned that the Lübeck Courtyard was built at the expense of the state (*uth unsrem schatte*), which meant that it was under the royal jurisdiction. It, like the Courtyard in Pskov, did not have the self-government that was possessed by the Novgorod German Courtyard of the 12th–15th centuries. The Tsar’s will did not involve the establishment of a Hanseatic Kontor, but only a place of compact “guest” residence (*gasthoff*) for privileged Lübeck merchants. Like other foreign merchants who traded in Novgorod and Pskov, they came under the control of “kind, comprehensive bailiffs” (*gude vorstendige prisstaven*), and the half duties paid by them were recorded in special books (*boken*), information from which was sent monthly to the head of the Ambassadorial order A. Shchelkalov (Ruthenica, n.d. g). The limited administrative resources of the new Courtyards inspired Lübeck to continue petitioning Moscow for increased privileges. The embassy of 1603, well represented in modern studies (Angermann, 2002; Neubauer, 1968; Iwanov, 2015; Tolkachev, 2010), received from Tsar Boris Godunov the privilege of having Courtyards in Novgorod, Pskov, Ivangorod and Arkhangelsk (Ruthenica, n.d. a). Novgorod courtyards – the new Lübeck and the old German ones – came into the full disposal of the Lübeck magistrate, and all the time later, until the closure in 1709, remained only under the control of Lübeck. The new, seventh edition of the Novgorod shra (charter), adopted in Lübeck in 1603, recorded this new state of affairs (Schlüter, 1911): at the head of the Courtyard were four foremen (*olderleute, frachtherren*), who had to be members of the Lübeck community of “Novgorod guests”, were confirmed by the Lübeck magistrate and lived in Lübeck (Abt. 1, § 1–4); the Kontor’s accounts were subject to annual examination by the “Novgorod guests” and the Lübeck magistrate (Abt. 1, § 24). According to the privilege of 1603, full tax exemption in Russia extended exclusively to citizens of Lübeck.

The “Russian issue” was almost never put on the agenda of the late Hanzetags (the exception was the Hanzetag of 1600, where the issue of an embassy to Moscow in 1603 was decided). Perhaps, it was this circumstance that gave reason for historians to talk about the reduction of Russian trade in Lübeck after the end of “Narva campaign” (Dollinger, 2012), although the expansion of the network of Lübeck Courtyards

in Russian cities at the turn of the 16th–17th centuries and the strengthening of their legal guarantees are clearly contrary to this. The poor reflection of this phenomenon in the protocols of the Hanzetags can be explained, firstly, by the predominance of intra-Hanseatic problems on the agenda (Iwanov, 2016) and, secondly, by Lübeck's obvious desire to conduct business in Moscow in a "Lübeck manner" (*von der Lübschen Art*). The latter reason, by the way, irritated other Hanseatic merchants: in one of Danzig's messages about the 1603 embassy it is said that the Lübeck people acted like "great, powerful gentlemen, who other cities, united with them confederatively, considered their subjects" (Iwanov, 2016). The success of Lübeck's "Russian policy", which opposed itself to other Hanseatic cities, can only be explained by the more than favorable position of the Russian rulers, who contributed a lot to the implementation of the Lübeck program to create a "Russian staple" to the detriment of other Hanseatic cities. The reasons of this favor remain unclear. By now, many researchers mention special flexibility of Lübeck diplomats, who were able to adapt to Russian customs and the tastes of court circles (Iwanov, 2015). As an assumption, we can note that the disposition of the Russian rulers to Lübeck could be explained by the participation of its citizens in the supply of strategic raw materials and weapons. This, in particular, is evidenced by archival materials concerning the prohibitions on the export by the Lübeck merchants to Russia of copper of the emperors Ferdinand I in 1561–1562 (Ruthenica, n.d. a-c) and Rudolf II in 1579–1581 (Ruthenica, n.d. k-l), as well as a letter from the Lübeck magistrate to Duke Adolf Schleswig-Holstein with an apology for the failed delivery of weapons to Russia in 1578 (Livonica, (n.d. a).

7. Conclusion

The Lübeck project of 1571 to create a "Russian staple" was implemented at the beginning of the 17th century thanks to a series of preventive measures aimed at strengthening the positions of Lübeck merchants in the trading Courtyards of Novgorod and Pskov in the first half of the 16th century, and, most importantly, due to the establishment of direct diplomatic contacts with Moscow. It abandoned the custom of concluding Russian-Hanseatic treaties, in which the Russian side was represented by Novgorod and Pskov, and the Hanseatic side by Livonian cities, and in accordance with the norms of Russian foreign policy practice, it received the desired privileges in the form of a royal charter. Thanks to this circumstance, Lübeck, as a subject of royal favor, among other Hanseatic cities that had trade interests in Russia, took an exceptional position guaranteed by the will of the Russian autocrat. The favor of the Russian rulers allowed Lübeck to solve the problem of the German (Lübeck) Courtyards "in the Lübeck way", namely, to take them out of the control of the Russian administration, which was provided for by the charter of 1586, and finally reassign under the magistrate of Lübeck, in accordance with the provisions made in 1603. All this opposed to the Hanseatic tradition, according to which the staples and Kontoren of the Hansa were under the jurisdiction of the Hanzetags, while the superseding of other Hanseatic people, not Lübeck ones, from the Russian market contributed to the destruction of the "network" structure, typical for the Hansa, and its reformation on confederal principles. All the facts allow us to raise a question about Lübeck's use of the Hanseatic traditions of "staple" trade and trade privileges for including the Russian North-West in its hinterland, thanks to which it retained its economic and political prestige. In any case, Lübeck's trade volume, which tended to decline at the end of the 15th century, in the 16th century began to grow and in the 17th century provided it with economic recovery.

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