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DECLINE OF HANSEATIC-RUSSIAN TRADE AT THE END 15TH CENTURY: MYTHOLOGY-REALITY BALANCE

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Abstract

The rapid development of Hanseatic-Russian trade in the 15th century was disturbed by the amalgamation of Novgorod with the Moscow state in 1478 and the following closure of the German mission in 1494. In Russian historiography it is accepted that these events defined the ultimate decline of the Hanseatic-Russian trade, a kind of crisis from which the parties didn't find a way out, however, modern researchers are not willing to stick to this opinion. This article presents an analysis of merchant documentation, on this basis the trade strategy of the Lübeck guild of "Nowgorodfahrer" of the late 15th century is considered, that is conditioned by corporation's desire to change the traditional system of East Baltic exchange of merchandise, which was based on the trade of "foreign" Hanseatic people with the Novgorodians brokered by the Livonians and that did no longer satisfy growing interests of the guild. The aggressive politics of Lübeck people that caused a sharp contest from the town council of Reval (Tallinn), increasing prominence of the guild on merchants of the German mission in Brügge, as well as participation of the "Nowgorodfahrer" in reinstatement actions of Hanseatic-Russian relations, make us once again turn to an issue of relevancy of Novgorod's trade with the Hansa at the end of the 15th century. The conclusions presented in the article make us doubt the correctness of the views of some Russian researchers on this problem, and also to determine mythology-reality balance in these processes.

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Keywords: Hanse, Hanseatic trade, "Nowgorodfahrer", Reval, Veliky Novgorod



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1. Introduction

The “Nowgorodfahrer” was a special trading corporation formed from prosperous Lübeck merchants focused on the Russian market. The consolidation of role of the “Nowgorodfahrer” in the Hanseatic-Russian trade dates back to the second half of the 15th century. The guild had strong partnering relationships with town councils of Lübeck and Reval, and their business functions were of great relevance for Eastern Baltic trade, therefore the commercial interests of the “Nowgorodfahrer” impacted directly on specifics of the Hanseatic-Russian merchandise exchange process. The guild’s striving to restrictive practice in trade in the Eastern Baltic and to the largest control over business operations in the region led to a conflict with the Reval council, whose interests run counter to the vector of trade policy pursued by the “Nowgorodfahrer”.

On June 28, 1491, the “Nowgorodfahrer” developed and approved eight points of the new scheme of the Hanseatic trade in the Eastern Baltic region (Stein, 1916, pp. 322–323). According to the regulations, the transit of goods coming from Lübeck could only go to Reval, Dorpat, Narva or Novgorod – it is towns where guild merchants had direct commercial establishments. It was forbidden to export goods to Pärnu, Riga, Königsberg, Danzig and Stockholm. Moreover, the goods transportation was allowed to be carried out exclusively on ships taken to freight by the freighters (*Frachtherren*) – the aldermen of the “Nowgorodfahrer” located in Reval. It seems that Reval people didn’t have enough holks, that is obliquely confirmed by the data given by Kreem (2017). So, when foul weather disturbed the arrival of large ships from Lübeck, freighters were allowed to engage smaller but always the best vessels for the goods transportation. It is interesting to note that this statement was developed within the common system of fighting against the pirate threat made by the “Nowgorodfahrer”. Some of statement points, for example, the necessity to let ships go to sea only as part of the flotilla, more than once occurred in correspondence between the guild’s aldermen and the town councils of Lübeck and Reval (Schäfer, 1883; Stein, 1916). For example, the skipper *Hinrik Schalm*, who sailed alone and without mercenaries on board in 1473, had to be suffered conviction of violating the corresponding oath (Neitmann & Thumser, 2018). Given that the “Nowgorodfahrer” counted as a very prosperous part of the Lübeck merchant class (Harder-Gersdorff, 2002) and dealt with large shiploads, their desire to secure the transported goods is of no doubt. That is why it was supposed to send very expensive goods only on holks and only via fixed routes that guaranteed the enforcement regulation of the “clean route” (Stein, 1916, pp. 322–323). That means that the order of the Eastern Baltic trade proposed by the guild was first of all aimed to fighting against the pirate threat (Kreem, 2001), however, its ultimateness and absence of alternatives underscores the desire of the “Nowgorodfahrer” to put the Reval trade under their control. Anyone who refused to follow the approved points was deprived of privileges of a Hanseatic merchant. In addition, other members of the trade union were forbidden to handle matters with him, and he was also forbidden to continue using ships chartered by freighters (Stein, 1916).

2. Problem Statement

In Russian historiography, it is usual to associate the closure of the German mission in Novgorod with the ultimate decline of the Hanseatic-Russian relations. At the same time, the analysis of the trade

policy of the “Nowgorodfahrer” in the late 15th century allows us to ponder the issues on the legitimacy of such assessments, because the business activity of Lübeck people demonstrates an increasing interest in the East Baltic trade, that allows allow saying that there is not only the decline of Hanseatic-Russian relations, but also the serious change of commodity exchange system after a short recession (Angermann, 2020; Markus, 2017).

3. Research Questions

In the course of studying of the stated problems it is necessary to review specifics of the trade policy of the “Nowgorodfahrer” at the end of the 15th century, mark by the increase of the guild’s control over the Eastern Baltic trade. The conflict between the corporation and the Reval town council uncovered traditional intra-Hanseatic contradictions (Jahnke, 2017), the analysis of which confirms the interest of the Hansa members in maintaining trade with Novgorod (Bessudnova, 2017; Koppe, 2020). In addition, it is necessary to study the degree of impact of the “Nowgorodfahrer” on the Hanseatic branch in Brügge, and also to define the degree of involvement of the “Nowgorodfahrer” in reinstatement actions of Hanseatic-Russian trade.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study is carried out in the context of the achievements of modern Hanseatic studies (Annas, 2020; Jahnke, 2019, 2021; Köhler & Jahnke, 2018; Küng, 2019; Kypta, 2020; Lukin, 2017; Sarnowsky, 2019; Strenga, 2018) and allows us to broaden the existing knowledge about nature of the Hanseatic-Russian merchandise exchange in the late 15th century, as well as to review the firm cliches in Russian historiography. In addition, the article touches upon specifics of the cooperation of individual members of the trade union, which is directly coupled with the development of the Eastern Baltic trade in the affected period.

5. Research Methods

This study is based on a complex analysis of the Hansa documentation appeared as a commercial correspondence of merchants and associated materials. The source base of this study composed of unpublished materials from the fond 230 in Tallinn City Archives (Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, n.d.), and documents published in volumes “Hanserecesse”, “Hansisches Urkundenbuch” and “Liv-, Est- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch”. The sources brought in on this study were formed into issue units, thanks to which the individual considered issues are clearly structured. This article is based on the induction technique: the analysis of some individual plots with their following summary to create a whole features picture of the considered problem.

6. Findings

The town council of Lübeck supported by all means the overture of the “Nowgorodfahrer”, giving reasons for that it was a pirate rampage in the Baltic region. According to evidence of worried town

councilors “now from time to time the sea is more and more engulfed in flames due to sinful pirates” (*nu de zee vormiddelst unrichtigen zeeroveren van tyden to tyden jo mer werdt bevlomet*) (Stein, 1916, pp. 334–335). So, the town council of Lübeck advised Reval people to accept the order proposed by the “Nowgorodfahrer” for the betterment of all because it is focused on reduction of trade risks. At the same time, Lübeck town councilors received many complaints about diverse harassment of their merchants in Reval, concerning new fees and requisitions, that significantly troubled commercial activities. The “foreign” Hansa people were forced to weigh their goods several times and pay the corresponding “weight-tax” – a special tax for scales use. It is possible that, among other things, the process proposed by the “Nowgorodfahrer” for chartering ships and transporting goods was such a reaction to actions of the Reval town council, which aimed to reduce profits of the Lübeck merchants. It was essential to recall that the Livonians tried in every possible way to keep their mediatory position in the trade of the Southern Baltic towns with Novgorod, often oppressing the Lübeck people compared to Russian merchants who traded in Revel, or defending the corresponding prohibition on guest trade (Bessudnova, 2021).

However, the town council of Reval took it slow in acceptance of the Lübeck statement. The town councilors agreed that the points proposed by the “Nowgorodfahrer” were of course focused on the reducing of sea voyages risks and were worked out for the common good, but they still wanted to transport goods on ships chartered independently (Stein, 1916). But Lübeck insisted that the town councils of Reval and Dorpat accepted the approved process without further discussion, but at the same time compromised on that the ships chartered by aldermen of the “Nowgorodfahrer” had to carry expensive goods, for example, high-grade textile material (Stein, 1916). At all events the question of a new order for merchant ships course was discussed until 1495 (Stein, 1916).

In the late 15th century, the “Nowgorodfahrer” actively argued against the consolidation of role of salesclerks (*gesellen*) in the Eastern Baltic exchange of merchandise. *Gesellen*, young servants (*junge knechte*), they negotiated deals with the goods of their employer on his behalf, receiving a certain percentage of the commercial operations as payment. In 1492, the town council of Reval came out for extending rights of *Gesellen*, and namely, requesting to allow salesclerks to transport expensive goods on large ships and trade (Stein, 1916). Young servants were not forbidden to handle an independent trade, but only in short-run batch of certain goods, and therefore, trying to increase their own profits, *Gesellen* often deceived trading partners, violated accepted norms of the Hanseatic-Russian exchange of merchandise, that made the stay of German merchants in Novgorod much more complicated (Bessudnova, 2016). The “Nowgorodfahrer” made a stand against such an idea despite the fact that the growth of trades of *Gesellen* was able to reduce the additional costs for exchange of merchandise by merchants of the guild. As it seems, such contradictions occurred due to that fact that most of the salesclerks were Reval burghers (Bessudnova, 2021), and expansion of their rights meant an increase of Reval’s role in the Eastern Baltic trade, so Lübeck people resisted in every possible way.

An important part of the Hanseatic-Russian trade was the import of Flemish thread-structure felt: raw materials came from Novgorod to Flanders and returned to Russia in form of finished products. Lübeck traditionally took place of a broker in goods exchange between Novgorod and Flanders. The striving of the “Nowgorodfahrer” to monopolize trade in the Eastern Baltic is directly connected with the increasing impact of the guild in Flanders. This is evidenced by that fact that German merchants from the

Hanseatic branch in Brügge in 1497 complained to the town council of Lübeck that the “Nowgorodfahrer” followed a hard-nosed policy about Flemish trade. Merchants wrote to town councilors of Lübeck: “Dear sirs, do a good deed and forbid the “Nowgorodfahrer” to indisputably speak on your behalf” (*Wilt, erbare heren, woll don unde vorbaden de Nouwersfarers voer ju unde hort se spreken*) (Schäfer, 1888). The specifics of relationships between merchants of the guild and the town council of Lübeck is the subject of an individual study, but, of course, the “Nowgorodfahrer” often used the impact of the Lübeck council to get the biggest profits. Thus wise, it is worth talking not only about the extension of influence of the guild on the Eastern Baltic trade – at the end of the 15th century, the “Nowgorodfahrer” tried to enlarge their influence in trade in Russian direction in general.

7. Conclusion

Merchants of the guild were directly involved into events that followed the closure of the German mission in Novgorod in 1494. The costs the embassies of Gottschalk Remelingsrode and Thomas Schrowe, who went to Moscow for negotiations on the release of detained Hanseatic merchants, as well as corresponding costs provides from the funds of the pound tax (*Pfundzoll*) (Schäfer, 1888) – a tax collected from all goods imported into the town and intended for military and other needs (Portnykh & Bessudnova, 2020). From all appearances, the “Nowgorodfahrer” paid a significant part of the total pound tax to the Reval treasury. When in 1499 the town council of Dorpat asked the town councilors of Reval to portion a part of pound tax to cover some costs corresponding to Dorpat trade, the town councilors confronted that such a category of costs the “Nowgorodfahrer” would not pay (Stein, 1916). In 1518, the aldermen of the guild from Lübeck asked the aldermen from Reval to promote annulment of the pound tax, noting that: “because the money, no matter how much, would be taken from us” (*wante idt gelt yls ßo vele na amparte uns*) (Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, n.d.). Despite the fact that the pound tax had a very negative impact on profit-earning of trade, and the incongruity between Reval and Lübeck people towards individual categories of costs led to violent controversies in 1516-1517 (Bessudnova, 2019), the “Nowgorodfahrer” paid significant sums amounting to tens of thousands of marks for various actions to resume Hanseatic-Russian connections (Schäfer, 1899, 1905). It is a suggestive issue about such expenses: was the Hanseatic-Russian trade really with no chance to succeed after the closure of the German mission in Novgorod, as it’s generally accepted or not?

The trade policy of the “Nowgorodfahrer” in the late 15th century was reflected by many intra-Hanseatic contradictions caused by growing impact of the guild on the Eastern Baltic trade. The merchants of the corporation aimed for maximum control over the Hanseatic-Russian exchange of merchandise that caused an active confrontation from Reval town council. The problem of introduction of a new affreightment procedure, as well as the issue of expanding the rights of *Gesellen*, clearly demonstrates specifics of a long-standing quarrel: both the Lübeck and the Reval people wanted to concentrate the governance of the Russian market in their hands preventing each other in every way. At the same time, the “Nowgorodfahrer” tried to dictate their own terms to merchants who traded in Flanders trying to control merchandise transit Brügge–Novgorod. It is important that the target processes took place in the period of decline of Hanseatic-Russian relations associated with Moscow’s incoherent policy. The efforts of the “Nowgorodfahrer” to monopolize the Eastern Baltic trade, as well as the interest of the

guild merchants in the quickest crisis resolution, illustrates the apparent relevancy of the Hanseatic-Russian exchange of merchandise in the late 15th century.

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