

INTRODUCTION

IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS AS FORMATIVE FORCES OF REGIONAL IDENTITY

Pärtel Piirimäe, Andres Andresen

Space and spatial thinking have become increasingly popular research themes, so that scholars are even speaking of “spatial turn” as one of the recent paradigm shifts in humanities and social sciences.¹ This has brought along a new wave of cross-fertilization between disciplines, where geography, in particular, has become an exporter of various concepts and methodologies.² In historical research, the understanding that “space” is essentially a cultural or social construction has triggered increasing attention to the varieties of spatial thinking in history. Among various spatial concepts borrowed from geographers (landscape, distance, environment, boundaries, etc.), the concepts of “regions” and “regionalism” stand out in recent historical scholarship. Regional histories are now seen as a viable alternative to national histories, which for a long period enjoyed an almost exclusive position in historical scholarship.³ The process of European integration and the current popular and officially approved vision of a “Europe of the regions” have undoubtedly played their role in changing research agendas.⁴

¹ Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The spatial turn: interdisciplinary perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009); Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann, *Spatial turn: das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008); Ralph Kingston, “Mind over matter? History and the spatial turn”, *Cultural and Social History*, 7:1 (2010), 111–121; Marko Lamberg, “Introduction: mapping physical and cultural space in pre-industrial Europe”, *Physical and cultural space in pre-industrial Europe: methodological approaches to spatiality*, ed. by Marko Lamberg, Marko Hakanen, and Janne Haikari (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011), 11–26.

² Warf and Arias, *The spatial turn*, 2.

³ See for example Stephen Jacobson (ed.), Andres Andresen, Branko Bešlin, Wolfgang Göderle, Zoltán Györe, Mario Muigg, „What is a region? Regions in European history“, *Layers of Power: Societies and Institutions in Europe*, ed. by Saúl Martínez Bermejo, Darina Martykánová, Momir Samardžić (Pisa: Pisa University Press 2010), 95–150, especially 95–98.

⁴ E.g. the speech by José Manuel Durão Barroso, „Europe of the regions: building Europe from the bottom up“, 27 August 2010, <<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/10/403&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>>

At the same time, there is hardly any agreement as to what a region actually is. The concept “region” is notoriously fluid and escapes any attempts of precise definition. The general definition offered, for example, by Norbert Götz – region “refers to something in between basic units and a total in a territorial sense” – leaves us quite empty-handed, being itself an indication of a futility to attempt a definition that would encompass all possible spatial entities that have been signified as regions. Götz is, of course, aware that this definition is too vague and narrows it down for the purposes of his investigation, taking “present-day nation-states” as his basic units and “Europe or the world” as the total.⁵ This coincides with the type of regions that Stefan Troebst has called historical meso-regions (*Geschichtsregionen*). Troebst characterizes such a region as “an individual cluster of social, economic, cultural and political structures and which is larger than a single state yet smaller than a continent”. Meso-regions differ from macro-regions, which encompass whole continents or civilizations like Europe or Sub-Saharan Africa, and micro-regions, which are inter-state or intra-state entities like Bavaria or Occitania.⁶

Both these definitions approach regions through the prism of (present-day) nation-states. It seems indeed more productive to define region negatively, as a counter-concept to nation-state, rather than to attempt to compile a list of necessary and sufficient characteristics that make a geographical area into a region. According to the negative definition, regional means “non-national”, signifying an area that does not coincide with the boundaries of a state but can still be viewed as a meaningful whole. A regionalist approach to history is thus an approach which consciously avoids the usage of nation-state as the main spatial unit of historical analysis, aiming instead to construct historical regions that would more appropriately

(2.7.2012). Analyses of regionalization: Wilfried Swenden, *Federalism and regionalism in Western Europe: a comparative and thematic analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *The role of regions and sub-national actors in Europe*, ed. by Stephen Weatherill and Ulf Bernitz (Oxford, Portland, OR: Hart, 2005); John Loughlin, “Europe of the regions’ and the federalization of Europe”, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 26:4 (1996), 141–162; Charlie Jeffery, *The regional dimension of the European Union: towards a third level in Europe?* (London, Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997). On recent developments in history research agendas, see Steven G. Ellis, Raingard Eßer, “Introduction: frontiers and regions in comparative perspective”, *Frontiers, regions and identities in Europe*, ed. by Steven G. Ellis, Raingard Eßer with Jean-François Berdah and Miloš Rezník (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2009), xiii–xxii.

⁵ Norbert Götz, “Norden: structures that do not make a region”, *European Review of History = Revue européenne d’histoire*, 10:2 (2003), 323–241.

⁶ Stefan Troebst, “Introduction: What’s in a historical region? A Teutonic perspective”, *European Review of History = Revue européenne d’histoire*, 10:2 (2003), 173–188.

reflect the common structures and identities of the period under scrutiny. For this reason, we should also be wary of considering nation-states as fundamental basic units that are constitutive of regions, considering that the region-building process might be the origin of such units in the first place. The similarities and differences between region-building and nation-building processes, and their mutual influences, are some of the most interesting problems of regionalist studies.

In this light, it is clear that the classification of regions into micro-, meso-, and macro-regions also has its limitations, because it is based on the world of modern nation-states. These limitations become apparent when one looks at the Baltic area, which is the object of research in this volume. The “Baltic region” in its present form emerged as late as the inter-war period, when the three republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that had gained independence in the aftermath of the First World War became referred together as “the Baltic States” (in German, *das Baltikum*). Thus the Baltic region may be classified as a typical supra-national meso-region, like “Scandinavia”, “the Balkans”, or “the Mediterranean”. However, the origins of regional identity go back to the earlier period when the entire area was a part of Tsarist Russia. In respect to this conglomerate empire, the Baltic area formed a sub-national micro-region, comprising today’s Estonia and Latvia. This perspective originates from nineteenth-century Baltic German historical-political discourse, which, proceeding from shared political history, confined the denotation of this term to the provinces of Estland, Livland, and Courland on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, excluding what is now Lithuania.

Thus the Baltic area offers interesting empirical data about the shifts of identity that take place when a region transforms from a sub-national region into a supra-national one. In the case of the Baltic region, this has occurred more than once, due to significant transformations of political rule over time. In the Middle Ages, the political region of Old Livonia – consisting of four bishoprics and the territory of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order – covered roughly the area of present-day Estonia and Latvia. Then, since the mid-sixteenth century, this area became the theater of war between all major neighboring powers. In the end, the Duchy of Estland (1561) and the Duchy of Livland (1629) were united under the Swedish crown, whereas the Duchy of Courland stayed under Polish supremacy. During the Great Northern War in 1710, Estland and Livland came under the rule of the Russian tsar, followed by Courland during the Third Partition of Poland-Lithuania in 1795. After the short period

of independence in the interwar period, the three Baltic states became incorporated into the Soviet Union and thus were transformed into a sub-national region again. As is well known, the Baltic states regained independence in early 1990s, which enables us to speak, yet again, of a supra-national meso-region.

The aim of the present volume is to study the origins and development of Baltic regional identity since the Swedish era until the interwar period. The articles in the volume focus on two inevitable components of the formation of regional identities: ideas and institutions. Just like in the case of nation-building, region-building can be considered a “construction”, i.e. the result of a conscious effort of elites to define or redefine the boundaries of a region in accordance with their own aims.⁷ Construction from the inside is complemented by the region-building from outside forces, be it the central authorities in a conglomerate empire or international actors that have their own (geo)political interests at stake. At the same time, it does not seem likely that a region can be constructed entirely *ex nihilo*: a region-building project of elites can succeed only if there is a certain set of structural commonalities in the given area. Region-building is based on this structural foundation and is further enhanced by institutional development. The articles in the volume bring numerous examples of the interplay and mutual reinforcement of ideas and institutions: institutional change is driven by ideas about regional cohesion, be it the imperial projects imposed on the Baltic provinces, or the Baltic’s own projects of a Nordic union or Baltic Entente.

This special issue of “Ajalooline Ajakiri. The Estonian Historical Journal” is one of the results of the research project, “Baltic regionalism: constructing political space(s) in Northern Europe, 1800–2000”, which joins scholars from the University of Tartu and the University of Oulu. The project is a part of the interdisciplinary research program “Nordic Spaces: Formation of States, Societies and Regions, Cultural Encounters, and Idea and Identity Production in Northern Europe after 1800”, financed mainly by the *Riksbankens Jubiläumsfond*.⁸ On 2–3 May 2008, the project members, along with scholars from Helsinki, Tartu, Glasgow, Potsdam, Toulouse, and Riga, held a workshop in Tartu that tackled various problems

⁷ This point is made very strongly in Götz, “Norden”, 324–325: “Region-building is, like nation-building, a project of elites in the struggle for resources, it is an enterprise driven forward by actors with collective material and immaterial interests, not something materialised by history.” Cf. Iver B. Neumann, “A region-building approach to Northern Europe”, *Review of International Studies*, 20 (1994), 53–74.

⁸ Nordic Spaces <<http://nordicspaces.com/>> (2.7.2012).

concerning the formation of Baltic regional identity. The majority of the articles in this collection developed from the papers presented at the workshop. Both due to a lack of space and for the sake of thematic coherence, the volume ends with the interwar period, so the papers dealing with post-World War II issues must be published elsewhere. On the other hand, the volume benefits from the contribution by Mart Kuldkepp, whose present research topic fits seamlessly with the general theme of Baltic regionalism.

The opening article by Pärtel Piirimäe, “Swedish or Livonian *patria*? On the identities of Livonian nobility in the seventeenth century”, takes a closer look at early modern political identities in the complex framework of the Swedish conglomerate state. Piirimäe concentrates his attention on the use of the concept of *patria* (fatherland) in the political discourses of the Swedish central government and the provincial political elites. In studying two major periods of transformation, when the central power tried to increase uniformity between the provinces and Sweden proper in the early and late seventeenth century, the author found that among the different layers of political identity, that of the province of Livland – with special regard to the provincial privileges – remained undisputedly dominant for the Livonian nobleman. Indeed, the primary political loyalty of the Livonian nobility was given to their provincial corporate body, the *Ritterschaft*. At the same time, the public discourse of the *Ritterschaft* claimed that the interests of the province and the state were intimately connected, as harm to the province would have meant harm to the whole state.

Piirimäe shows that while the particularistic identity of Livonian noblemen did not cause any serious problems during the reigns of Charles IX and Gustav Adolf, it clashed violently with the ambition of Charles XI to represent as *pater patriae* the interests of the entire Swedish realm. Charles XI thoroughly alienated the *Ritterschaft* of Livland from the Swedish power by forcefully imposing absolutist government on the province, which also destroyed its former privileged self-government – the very centerpiece of Livonian noble identity.

The article by Andres Andresen, “Formal stipulation and practical implementation of religious privileges in Estland, Livland, and Courland under Russian supremacy: researching the core of Baltic regional identity”, widens the scope of study to the three Baltic provinces. All three provinces retained their provincial self-government in the initial period of Russian rule. In Estland, Livland, and Courland, the agenda of common regional identity gained considerable ground among the Baltic German estates beginning in the early nineteenth century. However, all the provinces and

major towns sported significant differences in the institutional framework of society that partly dated back to the Middle Ages, presenting a substantial formal obstacle for the development of supra-provincial regional identity.

This paper considers the Lutheran religion as a major element of Baltic German regional identity. More specifically, the institutional foundation of religious self-reflection is taken under study, with a focus on the religious privileges of local estates and their implementation in practical life. The legal regulations that determined the content of the doctrine and the form of ecclesiastical organization – those facets of religion that had the main impact on identity formation – are researched in greater detail. Whereas the religious privileges conferred on the local estates during the formation of Russian rule further consolidated the ecclesiastical institutional particularism of the different political-administrative units on Baltic soil, the implementation of the 1832 Church Law merged all Lutheran ecclesiastical organizations into the single body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Russian Empire. Thus, for the first time in history, there existed significant institutional unity among the three provinces of Estland, Livland, and Courland.

The general theme of identity consolidation on the basis of institutional unification reform under Russian imperial supremacy is continued in the article by Lea Leppik, “The provincial reforms of Catherine the Great and the Baltic common identity”. Catherine II was the first Russian ruler who applied common administrative reforms to Estland and Livland, mostly during the so-called regency period from 1783–96. The unifying and rationalizing character of these reforms in the fields of provincial administration, the judiciary, police, and public welfare has been widely acknowledged, yet previous historiography has regarded them as a temporary episode with no major consequences for the nineteenth-century Baltic provinces. Leppik, however, argues that a substantial share of the new unified institutions remained in place after the official revocation of the regency order, considerably contributing to the step-by-step formation of common Baltic supra-provincial structures.

Eva Piirimäe’s contribution, “*Humanität versus nationalism as the moral foundation of the Russian Empire: Jegór von Sivers’ Herderian cosmopolitanism*”, discusses the Livonian writer and nobleman Jegór Julius von Sivers’ (1823–79) ideas on the status of the Baltic provinces within the Russian Empire. Drawing on the political philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder, Sivers criticized the distorted understanding of the Russian nationalists of the 1860s of the “principle of nationality”. In his view, the only

possible moral foundation of a state was Herderian cosmopolitanism – one that supports all kinds of human diversity including the new appreciation of nationalities, yet views common humanity (*Humanität*) as the underlying and overriding principle. Siviers' appropriation of Herder's ideas is significant, showing how Herder's ideas on the political reform of Riga, Livland, and Russia (on the one hand) and his theory of humane cosmopolitan patriotism (on the other) combine to exclude the idea of a strong "nation state", and point to a multinational federation consisting of self-governing republican and national states, as an appropriate political solution. In his own context, Siviers proposed the radical idea of a federative Russian Empire, which would consist of autonomous, culturally distinct and self-governing provinces as a desirable goal for the future. The Baltic provinces were to be the model for the rest of the Empire in this respect. At the domestic level, Siviers submitted a number of constitutional reform proposals to the Livonian Diet, with the aim of achieving indirect representation of all local estates and nationalities on the Diet. It is probably no exaggeration to claim that Siviers was the most consistent advocate of the Baltic regional autonomy and identity, based on the German cultural, religious, and legal tradition, but harmoniously combining the three main nationalities (German, Latvian, Estonian) of the region.

The article by Valters Ščerbinskis, "Neutrality, democracy, and kings: the political image of Sweden in the Latvian press before the Second World War", introduces new main players to the scene of Baltic regionalism. While until 1917 Baltic Germans were the carriers of supra-provincial common identity in the northwestern part of the Russian Empire, the situation fundamentally changed with the collapse of the Tsarist regime and the appearance of independent Baltic Republics after World War I. From then on, Baltic regionalism slowly but steadily transformed into the common political matter of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian nations.

For every self-image of a group, small or large, the images of others – but especially of neighbors – are crucially important. Ščerbinskis applies an imagological approach to the research of Sweden's reflection in Latvian society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period of time, the Latvian nation underwent the major processes of national awakening under foreign autocratic rule, democratic state-building, and the onset of an authoritarian regime. Against this background, the case of Sweden appears particularly relevant as a kind of exceptional success model. The author analyzes the contents of major Latvian newspapers according to certain well-balanced parameters. He

concludes that besides the expected changes over time, some particularly deep-rooted elements of Sweden's political image can be found – with long-term democracy combined with monarchy, political stability, and political neutrality topping the list. In the democratic Latvian Republic, newspapers with distinctly different political preferences accordingly highlighted different subjects.

The next article, by Mart Kuldkepp, “‘Grundbesitzer aus Estland’: activist regionalism in the Baltic Sea area in 1916”, switches the focus from the Latvian nation to the bold political ambitions of their northern neighbors during World War I. By 1916, the possibility of Russian Empire's disintegration had become imminent, thus presenting great potential opportunities for the nations under Russian rule. The author studies one episode in the wider endeavor of the Estonian “private diplomat” Aleksander Kesküla, to replay (in a modified way) an act from seventeenth-century Baltic regionalism: to reunite the Estonian territory with the Swedish crown. In this case Kesküla was accompanied by the book publisher Jakob Ploompuu. From previous historiography, Kesküla has probably been best known as the mediator of German money to the Russian Bolsheviks in a serious covert operation of the *Kaiserreich* to weaken the Russian Empire. Kuldkepp researches the collaboration of Kesküla and Ploompuu in Stockholm during the spring of 1916, focusing his attention on the textual and contextual analysis of a series of writings resulting from this collaboration. These texts, signed by “Grundbesitzer aus Estland” but most probably originating from the hand of Kesküla and targeted at Swedish activists as well as at the representatives of Germany and the United States, express the ideas of weakening Russia, bringing Estonia closer to Sweden, and averting the danger of Baltic German dominance on Estonian land. One of Kesküla's aims included the desire to demonstrate that attitudes similar to his own had broad support among Estonians.

Kari Alenius' article, “Dealing with the Russian population in Estonia, 1919–1921”, provides a valuable case study on the process of a nation's identity transformation during the early years of state-building. The fall of the Russian Empire and the birth of the new republics brought about a radical change in the power balance of different ethnic groups on Baltic soil. The former Baltic German elite became an insignificant minority, as did the former Russian bureaucratic elite. Yet the democratic government of the Estonian Republic did not take disproportionate advantage of the new power configuration against the former privileged ones. On the contrary, in 1925 generous cultural autonomy was legally secured for all minorities

in the Estonian Republic, which served as a unique example for the whole of Europe. It is natural, of course, that during the process of creating a new state Estonians were vitally interested in eliminating possible threats to their statehood and consolidating their cultural independence.

The direct widespread Russian influence in the Baltic region was a relatively late phenomenon, starting with the Russian Orthodox conversion movement among Estonian and Latvian peasants in the late 1840s and then gaining ground with the cultural and administrative Russification in the 1880s. The young Estonian Republic faced the urgent task of integrating the Russian population, especially in those areas of the state where Estonians remained a minority. Alenius examines this problem in greater detail.

Since the interwar period, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been increasingly regarded as a coherent political region within the broader framework of European international relations. Indeed, the three republics held various cooperative activities in diverse fields of life. At some point all three declared close cooperation as a major objective of their foreign policy. The Baltic Entente (1934–40) of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania represented the institutional culmination of this ambition. The main aim of the political alliance was to pursue coordinated action in foreign policy. The article by Eero Medijainen, “The 1934 Treaty of the Baltic Entente: perspectives for understanding”, which closes this special issue of the “Estonian Historical Journal”, studies the approaches which have been used to explain the Baltic Republics’ mutual cooperation, particularly concentrating on the Baltic Entente. Medijainen argues that in the case of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania it is not possible to detect a common internal identity among these three nations. The interwar Baltic region of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania has to be regarded as a political construction primarily dependent on external factors, such as a shared threat to security and the perspective of other states that associated similar themes with all these new republics on the western border of the Soviet Union.