

Vasilijus Safronovas, *Kampf um Identität. Die ideologische Auseinandersetzung in Memel/Klaipėda im 20. Jahrhundert (Veröffentlichungen des Nordost-Instituts, 20)*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015. 342 p. ISBN 9-783447-10352-7

Going against the conventions of the genre, this review of Vasilijus Safronovas' reflective and thoroughly researched study on identity conflicts in Memel/Klaipėda must start with a personal reminiscence.

When I began my work at the Baltic Academy in Lübeck in the 1990s, one of the first issues I was unexpectedly confronted with was the urn of Martynas Jankus, which was temporarily stored in an office cabinet waiting for the next step of its return from a cemetery in Flensburg to Jankus' home village in Bitėnai in the Klaipėda region (see p. 269). Whereas hardly anyone in Germany had any memory of him or of the German-Lithuanian cultural and political conflicts in 'Memelland', the public commemoration of Jankus was part of Lithuanian identity building in the Klaipėda region after the end of Soviet Lithuania.

The symbolic return of Martynas Jankus encompasses the topic of the book: the rivalry or conflicts between collective identities in the city of Klaipėda/Memel throughout the 20th century. The publication is based on a PhD dissertation defended at Klaipėda University in 2011, and has since also been published in Polish. The German translation is an expanded version, as the author states in his foreword. Before going into detail, potential readers should be advised, however, that the book is not easy to read and understand, as the author seemingly gives priority to exactness of the terminology, with the consequence of frequent repetitions at the expense of an easily comprehensible text. In addition, the German text is inhomogeneous, well-written parts are interrupted by stylistically weaker sections, with many genitive cascades, which the translator could have avoided. Furthermore, the book would have benefitted from illustrations supporting the author's argument.

Safronovas' book can be seen as part of a collection of studies during recent decades on towns in East Central Europe that changed their national citizenship, as well as large parts of its population, due to forced or state-directed migration politics. These changes produced breaks in the urban topography, both material and symbolic. In this connection, discourses on the city's history, their materialisation in monuments and urban topography, and their various public performances, had a great impact on forming the individual and collective identities of the inhabitants.

Like other cities on the southern edge of the Baltic, the case of Memel/Klaipėda comprised intense conflicts even before the Second World War, due to its special political status (similar to Gdańsk), and the impact of Sovietisation, leading to a new conflict of Soviet/Russian versus national identity (as in other towns of the Baltic Soviet republics). Combining both aspects can provide arguments for regarding Klaipėda as a specific case, but it might also be worth looking at the case from the opposite direction in a comparative perspective. The precondition for such an approach is sound research on Klaipėda, and this is what Safronovas presents here.

The book starts with a well-informed debate on the research of the collective memory, and on scholarly identity discourses, in which the processes of construction and their systematic structure are underlined. The author refers to them as identity ideologies. As ideology is understood here as a system of meanings, one might ask why the author largely omits the term 'discourse', although he claims briefly in the introduction to include discourse analysis (pp. 27–28). Similar things might be said about the concept of 'master narrative'. The stress on identity ideologies, I assume, is due to the fact that the author tries, with good reason, of course, to depart from an essentialist understanding of identity, as well a Rankean approach, to reveal things 'how they really were'. Instead, Safronovas focuses on spheres of communication and their impact on semantics. The empirical basis of the study is extremely broad, and includes, as well as published texts and archival material, an analysis of performative acts, of monuments, of street name changes, and of appropriation practices, among other things.

The book consists of three chapters, comprising firstly the competition between German and Lithuanian nationalisms before 1945, secondly the relationship between the Sovietisation of the Lithuanian discourse and the Lithuanianisation of the Soviet one, and thirdly the situation after 1988.

As the author points out, the situation of Klaipėda during the First World War was crucial, because there was hardly a nationalisation of the German population before; instead, loyalty towards the house of Hohenzollern prevailed. The situation changed only with the formation of the *Heimatbund*, and received a boost with the Lithuanian occupation of the Klaipėda region in January 1923. The analysis of organisational structure and semiotics reveals a special kind of German nationalism centred on the regional category of *Memelländer*, which contrasted with the national category of Great-Lithuanians. German culture as its central discourse element, however, could also include the Small-Lithuanians as a minor partner. Under the influence of Nazi ideology, the hierarchy of region and nation then changed (like the turn from *Deutschbalten* to *Baltendeutsche*) towards *Memeldeutsche* as part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Interestingly, the German notion of *Heimat* is only briefly touched on, and has received less attention in Safronovas' analysis than one might expect from other studies. Compared to the German identity discourse, the Lithuanian one developed later and more slowly, firstly because it did not have any organisational

roots before 1918, and secondly because it could hardly play the regional card, as the autonomy of the Klaipėda region was seen as positive in the German discourse, but negative in the Lithuanian. A consolidation appeared only in 1933, with the domination of the Tautininkai. The annexation of 1923 was now presented as liberation from the German yoke, and, as in Poland, the stress on the connection with the Baltic Sea since 1934 became a further element of identity building. Furthermore, the author discusses the rivalry in monuments and street names, and points to the symbolic return of German domination since November 1938, with the re-erection of German monuments that were demolished after the annexation of 1923.

The German discourse ceased to exist in the city from 1945, for obvious reasons. Instead, a new Russian-Lithuanian rivalry emerged, although on different terms, as it was not performed publicly. Now, as elsewhere, the Soviet ideology about the liberation from fascism, the defeat of bourgeois society, and the brotherhood of nations dominated. As the author shows with many details, decisions for elements of Soviet/Russian versus Lithuanian identity depended largely on situational decisions, as might be shown by the monuments to Kristijonas Donelaitis and Herkus Mantas, which were erected, after long debates and contradictory decisions, in 1973 and 1986 respectively. An important role in this rivalry was played by Lithuanian intellectuals who were active even before the war and could connect with earlier national discourses. Another aspect, which would also hold for other cities on the periphery (like Szczecin or Olsztyn), was the opening of new academic institutions.

As a result, elements of the pre-war Lithuanian identity discourse were revived, or transformed into the Soviet context, like the Festival of the Sea, since 1963. However, the author does not address the Stalinist dogma of socialist content and national form, which is referred to, for instance, in Estonia, Latvia and Poland, in order to explain the continuation of some elements of the pre-war national culture. Instead, he stresses the sharp dividing line between the Soviet and Lithuanian discourses. Although the German discourse was no longer present in Klaipėda, architectural and cultural relics, such as cemeteries, constituted reference points for anti-German ideologemes, which were still relevant elements in building new identities. With regard to the debates on the cultural heritage and the preservation of the city's historic fabric, Safronovas refers to the strategy of strengthening local characteristics, which was also based on situational references to the Soviet and the national identity discourses. In analysing the activities of experts working in museums or monument protection and similar fields, the aspect of their professional ethos might have been included, which in some cases led to decisions and strategies that differed from the prevailing ideologies. Following these observations, a more general critical question might be added, whether the author focuses on an interpretation in which deviations from the prevailing German-Lithuanian and Soviet-Lithuanian identity conflicts are less relevant.

For the period after 1988, the author observes a last phase of competing identities, until 1991, where the main actors were the Communist Party on the one hand, and the social movement Sąjūdis on the other. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an increasingly nationalistic discourse has been the result. The year 1923 is now seen as a mythical foundational event for the Lithuanian city, whereas the Russian commemorative actions focus on the Soviet military cemetery and on the liberation from fascism. The appropriation or reconstruction of German traditions since 1988 is interpreted as a post-conflict approach on the one hand, the case of the city's coat of arms. On the other hand, it can be seen as phenomenon of an increasing consumer orientation, which becomes manifest first of all in the food culture, as elsewhere.

Along with a summary of the previous chapters, the conclusions address some comparative aspects. According to the author, they can be identified, among others, in the roles of social networks, memory cultures, and the distribution of power. In my opinion, the role of alternative discourses for Klaipėda could have been addressed in more detail. In the light of my remarks above, some additional effort would be necessary in order to obtain a platform for a broader comparative discussion. Without any doubt, however, it is a major achievement of Vasilijus Safronovas' impressive study to introduce Klaipėda into international discussions on cities with competing national identities, based on a broad theoretical framework, as well as on rich empirical material.

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