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Netherland Regionalism and the Decline of the Hansa

WILLIAM L. WINTER*

FOR more than three hundred years before Columbus' rediscovery of America, the merchants of North Germany residing abroad, especially those from the North and Baltic seacoasts, had been associated in a league for collective security and the pursuit of their occupation as aliens in north European towns outside the immediate jurisdiction of the Germanic Roman Empire.¹ As the safety and prosperity of the merchants depended on maintaining mutually shared rights to trade and to the protection of a more or less extraterritorial status, a strong consciousness of forming a distinct society had identified members of the Hansa—*i.e.*, men of the trade guilds specially chartered.² Early necessity of organization for the common welfare had produced the federation of their native towns, which from the middle of the fourteenth century began customarily to consult together on matters of common interest and for this purpose annually to send delegates to Lübeck, leading commercial town on the western Baltic.³ The union thus formed, though as loose in constitutional structure as the confederation of North American states before 1789, tended for nearly two centuries to be pre-eminent in the economic and political sense over the North Germanic and Baltic countries, through control of surrounding waters and grasp of economic necessities of the areas serviced by its ships. After the emergence of nationalism in the later fifteenth century, the contemporaneous rise of local industry, and the opening of sea routes to Asia and the Americas—with the resultant influx of commodities in numbers great enough to diminish relatively the scope of Baltic trade—recession of the Hanseatic League began, soon to be complicated by unsolved internal difficulties, particularly the withdrawal from the union, and commercial competition of important Netherland communities.

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¹ Walther Stein, "Zur Entstehung und Bedeutung der Deutschen Hanse," *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, XVII (1911), 265-363.

² For evolution of the term "Hansa" see David K. Bjork, "Three Hansa Towns and Archives—Bruges, Lübeck, Tallinn," *Pacific Historical Review*, IX (September, 1940), 297-306, esp. 298.

³ *Ibid.*, IX, 298-99; Stein, in *Hans. Gesch.*, XVII, 275-76; Ernst Daenell, *Die Blütezeit der deutschen Hanse: Hansische Geschichte von der zweiten Hälfte des XIV bis zum Letzten Viertel des XV Jahrhunderts* (2 vols.; Berlin, 1906), II, 309.

In the west, the interests of the Hansa had centered on Flanders, a province in the oldest medieval records already industrially advanced and prosperous in the manufacture of cloth.⁴ Bruges, through its port of Sluis, fronted on the North Sea at the opening of land separating the Flemish coast from the more Germanic northern portion of the Low Countries. The provincial and municipal Flemish governments had granted liberal concessions to the Germans who came by ship to this busy emporium,⁵ for at the Hanseatic factory in Bruges products from the far Baltic and Russia were exchanged for those of the fertile lowlands and for imports from the Mediterranean.⁶ The settlement of North German merchants in Bruges, an agency after 1350 supervised collectively and governed as a colony by the united cities of the Hansa,⁷ implemented the creation of special commercial privileges. Outstanding among the means of canalizing Netherland trade to Hanseatic advantage was the staple, the monopoly of certain vital commodities. While the list of goods varied from time to time, tar, wood, grain, and cloth could usually not be purchased in the Low Countries except in Bruges or at specified yearly markets in other cities. Provisions on which the staple rested had been embodied in treaties between the Netherland towns and the Hanseatic union as a whole, and the staple reflected and augmented the wealth and significance of Bruges, until in the later fifteenth century the harbor of Bruges, the Zwin, began to choke up with sand.

By 1500 commercial preponderance had shifted from Flanders to Brabant and Holland, where Antwerp and Amsterdam, respectively, had usurped economic leadership of the Low Countries.⁸ Unable to recognize the gravitational force of the displacement, the Hansa attributed the breakdown of authority and collapse of its position to individual violations of the staple by disloyal merchants or to predatory and competitive incursions of non-Hanseats.⁹ In the reports of the factory at Bruges to Lübeck, chief city of the league, the same abuses were catalogued again and again with monotonous lack of insight into the reasons for their recurrence, an absence of under-

⁴ Paul Kletler, *Nordwesteuropas Verkehr, Handel, und Gewerbe im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 1924), p. 26.

⁵ Heinrich Rogge, *Der Stapelzwang des hansischen Kontors zu Brügge im 15. Jahrhundert* (Kiel, 1903), pp. 40-42.

⁶ Jules Finot, *Etude historique sur les relations commerciales entre la Flandre & l'Espagne au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1899), p. 22. Cf. Bjork, in *Pacific Hist. Rev.*, IX, 299.

⁷ Stein, in *Hans. Gesch.*, XVII, 275-76.

⁸ Cf. Karl Ver Hees, "Niederländische Handels- und Finanzpolitik unter Karl V.," *Economisch-historisch Jaarboek*, XVIII (1934), 154-228.

⁹ Gravamina I, p. 2 (1509). (Manuscript reports of the Hanseatic factory at Bruges deposited in the archives of Lübeck, transcribed and edited by William L. Winter from photostats in the private library of Professor Waldemar Westergaard at Los Angeles. Collectively titled "Gravamina des brüggischen Kontors," the reports, composed in 1509, 1511, and 1514, are cited for these years as Gravamina I, Gravamina II, and Gravamina III, respectively.)

standing that accounts for Hanseatic inability to effect definitive adjustment. Encroachments of Netherland traders in the east-west intercourse (*i.e.*, that along the North Sea-Sound-Baltic route) repeatedly alarmed agents of the factory, whose membership by 1509 had already fallen to a point imperiling its existence.¹⁰ Of the factors immediately threatening the submergence of the Hanseatic economy in the Low Countries, the most influential had been the release of Holland, Friesland, and Zealand, according to a decree of the duke of Burgundy in 1501, from their contractual obligation to observe the staple. With the northern maritime provinces free to carry on direct external trade, the fate of the factory was now to depend chiefly on the degree to which the inhabitants of Brabant and Flanders fulfilled the legal requirements to which they had bound themselves: to trade in certain commodities only through the Hanseatic agents at Bruges.

To bolster the failing staple, the Hanseats in 1508 guaranteed by treaty their legal and fiscal rights in Antwerp,¹¹ limiting excise duties on prescribed articles, protecting access to markets, and forbidding unauthorized detention of merchants and goods.¹² Yet from 1509 violations of the agreement had to be cited by the Germans; in 1511 and again in 1514, infringements of treaty rights were the subject of correspondence between the factory and Lübeck, without any indication of remedial measures being taken by either the Hansa or Antwerp. That such measures were possible seems doubtful in view of the awkwardness of the legal machinery reconstituted at the time of the treaty, for the procedures conserved in its clauses indicated Hanseatic imagination to be inert, incapable of generating new ideas or advancing institutionally. To obtain damages for injury done by a North German, an Antwerp burgher must apply in the latter's home city, then, if successful, wait three months for the execution of the judgment under foreign rules of equity, often difficult for him to comprehend.¹³ Ignoring this roundabout method, Antwerp often compensated harm to its citizens for which a Hanseat was believed responsible by seizing goods and arresting merchants, the persons and property of the innocent if the guilty were beyond reach.¹⁴ This danger to Hanseatic men and property was considerably increased after the outbreak of war in 1511, between the German Hansa towns and Antwerp as the allies of Sweden and Denmark, respectively.¹⁵

¹⁰ Gravamina II, p. 12 (1511).

¹¹ Gravamina I, p. 2 (1509). For text of the treaty see *Die Recesse und Andere Akten der Hansetage* (24 vols. in three parts; Leipzig, 1870-1913), third part, V, 488-89 (Dec. 12, 1508).

¹² Gravamina I, p. 3 (1509).

¹³ *Ibid.*; Gravamina II, pp. 14-15 (1511).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16 (1511); Gravamina III, pp. 31, 33 (1514).

¹⁵ *Cf. ibid.*, p. 30 (1514).

Basic motivation of the conflict between the Hanseatic system and the rising Netherland cities can be traced to the economic maturation of the Low Countries; formerly Holland, Zealand, and Brabant had been tributary to the cloth industry region of Flanders, from which the wool of England and of the relatively pastoral northern Netherlands was returned, fabricated, in exchange for more wool and for agricultural or other raw commodities. From the Baltic and from Russia had come honey, furs, and wood products, from the Sound and the North Sea fish, cargoes of the same Hanseatic ships that on the north and eastern voyages had carried back fine Flemish cloth. Perhaps because of the comparative infertility of their shore and the sandy hinterland, or because of the proximity of the herring, the maritime North Germans had sought their living on the sea, specializing as merchant sailors after having laid the foundations of their prosperity as fishermen. Flemish trade with England and with northeast Europe was by means of Hanseatic bottoms, and the profit derived from this vigorous intercourse served to enrich the Hanseatic towns. At the ends of the trade routes lay flourishing markets situated in richly productive countries—London, Bruges, Novgorod, Bergen—the transport of whose commodities furnished Hanseats an excellent livelihood.

For a century and a half before 1500 all provinces of the Netherlands were being transformed by industrial activity;¹⁶ during the same period England began to emerge from agrarian simplicity and to sharpen the ingenuity of Flemish wool-weavers by its competition. Under this impetus the Low Countries economically ran far ahead of the rest of northern Europe, prospering and looking for ways of investing surplus capital. To circumvent costs of transportation of their goods by the Hansa, to increase their own profits, the Netherlanders now built and navigated merchant fleets. In 1511 the merchants of the Bruges factory acknowledged their successful rivalry in Baltic trade; ships from Brabant, Holland, and Zealand were bringing from the east wax, copper, tallow, and other goods in quantities so large that the agents of the factory feared the ruin of the Hansa.¹⁷ With an attitude typical of rising economic powers seeking to advance their own manufactures, Antwerp in 1509 excluded Hansa-carried goods through the medium of a protective tariff, despite provisions to the contrary in the treaty of 1508 with the League.¹⁸ High duties prevailed in Holland and Zealand as well.¹⁹ In an earlier period tariff barriers would not have affected members of the Hansa, who traded

¹⁶ Ver Hees, in *Econ.-hist. Jaarb.*, XVIII, 154-64.

¹⁷ Gravamina II, p. 17 (1511).

¹⁸ Cf. Gravamina I, p. 4 (1509); Gravamina II, p. 16 (1511); Gravamina III, p. 35 (1514).

¹⁹ Gravamina I, p. 6 (1509); Gravamina III, pp. 38-39 (1514).

only at specified times of the year when their goods were admitted in accordance with their privileges, either duty-free or according to a special schedule. By 1509 both the restriction of Hanseatic commerce to semiannual fairs and limitation of customs duties imposed by treaty on Netherland cities had broken down. However, because their goods sold at higher prices than elsewhere, despite import duties, Hanseatic merchants—at least those from Brunswick and Hamburg—traded in Antwerp throughout the year.²⁰

Even before the dispersion of Hanseatic activity in the Low Countries beyond its former narrow and privileged geographical boundaries and seasonal confines, those fairs and markets reserved for the use of the North Germans had been invaded by non-Hanseats from the north Netherland area.²¹ In the same year, 1509, the merchants observing the unfavorable tendency of affairs from their post at the factory in Bruges accused Baltic member cities of the union, especially Danzig, of economic collaboration with those Netherlanders who as non-Hanseats were in competition with the union as a whole.²² Such Dutch cities as had joined the league were mostly willing to withdraw, since membership imposed obligations without adequately compensating privileges, and the factory was becoming useless through lack of trade as the municipal harbor of Bruges choked up with sand. Hanseats themselves refused to, or could not, use the port;²³ the staple was difficult to maintain because of inaccessibility of the Flemish capital from the sea, in addition to the fact that in 1501 the duke of Burgundy had relieved the northern provinces of the obligation of its use.

Legally exempt from the jurisdiction of the staple, Holland, Friesland, and Zealand had declined to respect an institution inconvenient to their economy and inhibitive of capital expansion. With only accumulated capital on which to depend, while that of the Dutch was constantly increasing, the German Hanseats were due to be outdistanced by their Netherland rivals. Still possessing the greatest tonnage and preferential rights at the termini of trade routes, the Hansa missed the chance to reorganize on a truly international basis and by voluntary renunciation of obsolete privileges to recreate its strength. In developing along a logical path the distribution of commodities made locally, Holland, especially, achieved easy and natural entrance into the field of north European trade. By-passing the surcharges of the factory at Bruges, the Hollanders were able to make their products accessible to con-

²⁰ Gravamina II, pp. 13-14 (1511).

²¹ Gravamina I, p. 2 (1509).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 5 (1509); Gravamina II, p. 19 (1511).

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13 (1511); *Hanse Recesse*, third part, VI, 38 (Oct. 31, 1510), 292-93 (July 6, 1511).

sumers in the Hanseatic home regions. Their prices, after the establishment of their own mercantile marine, did not have to include the costs of detours or the maintenance of agencies like the factory whose purpose had virtually fallen into disuse. Gradually they pushed into the Baltic area, where their representatives tried to emulate the functions long pre-empted by the North Germans. Though Hanseatic ordinances forbade their learning Russian,²⁴ no legal handicap could check the tide springing from abundance of production in Holland. Manufactures from that thriving province flowed past Hanseatic channels, to be exchanged for raw materials and other natural commodities of the Baltic hinterland. The emancipatory decree of Philip of Burgundy had merely served to make licit a commerce already flourishing, for the Netherland industry of the Renaissance, like that of the British during the Napoleonic wars, was stronger than the legal barriers to its foreign markets.

As the protagonist of Hanseatic interests, Lübeck began in 1509 a period of unsuccessful diplomatic maneuvering to paralyze the Netherland trade with the Baltic region and to safeguard its own profitable relations with the Swedish nationalist party. The city prevailed upon Emperor Maximilian to interdict aid to and intercourse with Denmark, on the part of the towns of Brabant, Flanders, Holland, and Zealand.²⁵ Inasmuch as the Hansa offered no compensation to the Dutch for the loss of Danish and Baltic trade, the command was consistently disobeyed, and Netherland pressure upon Maximilian influenced him to rescind his edict a year later.²⁶ Thereupon Lübeck rejoined, diplomatically by privately advising the Netherlanders not to approach Danish waters with matériel or goods, and by announcing penalties for the navigation of the Sound;²⁷ then—after the admonition was, not unexpectedly, disregarded—by attacking, dispersing, and seizing part of the Dutch merchant fleet.²⁸ This resort to force followed the Dutch reply, issued through Amsterdam, to the effect that the fleet would proceed to the Sound in accordance with its preparation and requesting Lübeck to instruct its captains to let the fleet pass unhindered, invoking the law of reprisal in case of interference.²⁹ During 1510 Lübeck had indicated its intention to enforce the ban on Baltic commerce by taking as prizes ships from Holland, Friesland, and other Netherland provinces,³⁰ so that its determined blow to break

²⁴ Daenell, II, 419.

²⁵ *Hanse Recesse*, third part, V, 406 (Feb. 20, 1509).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, third part, V, 689-90 (Jan. 26, 1510).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, third part, V, 690-91 (Mar. 17, 1510).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, third part, VI, 266 (Aug. 24, 1511). The attack occurred on August 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, third part, V, 691-92 (Apr. 10, 1510).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, third part, VI, 71 (Feb. 3, 1511).

the whole might of the Dutch mercantile marine on August 11, 1511, may be regarded as the culmination of a prolonged campaign, rather than as a unique incident. Amsterdam had already confiscated Hanseatic goods, including property of Lübeck,³¹ and wares in transit to or from the factory at Bruges; apprehension that further reprisals might occur³² were to find justification during the three years following.³³

Checked first by the emperor and then by the patent clumsiness in its use of force, demonstrating the inadequacy of belligerent action easily retaliated by the Dutch towns, the schemes of the Hansa to restrict Netherland trade and to cut off Denmark from the assistance of its wealthy and vigorous allies were defeated, while whatever idea Lübeck may have had of resubjecting the Low Countries to the staple was likewise frustrated. Rapid failure of the coercive policy toward the towns of his Burgundian realm had caused Maximilian to revoke the inhibition briefly laid upon their commercial ambitions at the moment of the emergence of their greatness as the economic backbone of his northern territories. The imperial edict of revocation, because of its neutrality benevolent to the Dutch, symbolized the delivery of the northern waters to Netherland merchantmen. Reprisals exacted by the Low Country towns, particularly Amsterdam, with surrounding Holland the center of opposition to the Hansa, suggested the approaching dissolution of the union, through the virtual secession of the youngest and most promising branch.

Activities of the Hansa in the Low Countries during the first twelve years of the sixteenth century indicate failure to preserve those privileges and rights which had been the basis of the union. The primary function of the Hansa as an organization devoted to trade was to exchange goods, for production was carried on only individually by certain cities, and the areas of consumption on which the greatness of the union had been dependent had extended far beyond political boundaries. Thus, after the opening of the modern era, with the triumph of a type of finance based on the possession of large blocks of monetary capital and the rapid manipulation of credit, the Hanseats, whose wealth had been in their ships, were at a disadvantage with respect to the financiers of Holland and Antwerp. The manufactures of the Netherlands were abundant enough to cause, by virtue of their innate desirability, new ships to be built to satisfy the ambitions of the masters of industry. The Hanseatic fleet had become dispensable, and no diplomatic argument could persuade the burghers of northwestern Europe to renew or repair those con-

³¹ *Ibid.*, third part, VI, 173 (Mar. 24, 1511).

³² *Ibid.*, third part, VI, 266 (Aug. 24, 1511).

³³ Cf. Gravamina II, pp. 22-23 (1511); Gravamina III, p. 38 (1514).

cessions to the merchants and shippers to whom they had been once indebted for the prosperity of their cities and the dissemination of material culture.

After the formal release in 1501 of the northern and eastern provinces from their subjection to the staple, the general economic decline of Bruges and the removal of Hanseatic trade and merchants to more favorable localities in the Low Countries destroyed the importance and power of the factory. What remained was little more than a skeleton organization, often unable to perform any function because of lack of merchant personnel. The Hanseatic role had been rendered obsolete by the fact that the Netherland provinces, particularly the northern, had risen in manufacture and trade to the point where the services of the Germans were superfluous. Hanseatic captains and merchants, finding themselves nonessential in ports and towns which once had welcomed and depended on them, and having individually to re-orient their interests, no longer observed the regulations of the league, but took their cargoes to, and bought from, cities with which they were not authorized to trade.

Through failure to adjust its policy to the transition in Netherland economy, the Hanseatic leadership, particularly that of Lübeck, demonstrated all too clearly the weakness of its diplomacy. Between 1508 and 1511, attitudes of patronizing friendship alternated with the threat and use of violence, dissipating Hanseatic prestige. Since Bruges had ceased to be, in any sense, a center of northwest European trade, its position as a seaport having been usurped by Antwerp, it became necessary for the Hansa to come to terms with the latter city, whose burghers were to hesitate in granting privileges to German merchants that might considerably restrict their own freedom of commerce.

To the north, in Holland, Amsterdam stood out as leader of that province whose fleets were opposed to conservation of Hanseatic supremacy in the northern seas, and that city disregarded Hanseatic opinions and warnings to a degree comparable to the intensity of its own commerce and diplomacy as far eastward as the Baltic. After the Hansa had failed to prevent the economic and military co-operation of Dutch and Danish interests, these two strongest opponents of the league soon allied. No subsequent effort was able to overcome the barrier thus erected to the continuation of the Hanseatic career. Dutch ascendancy in the Low Countries was able to develop economically and politically throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, while, by its control of the Sound, Denmark was able to open and close the gate through which Hanseatic intermarine trade must pass.

For nearly two centuries the North German cities had striven collectively

to achieve control over the Baltic and North seas, not only through unequivocal demands and direct action but also diplomatically by setting one foreign power against another. After 1500 internal tensions within the Hansa, created by the rise of individual Netherland towns to a greatness unbalancing the former equitable structure of the league, made impossible the co-operation necessary to consistent policy. Affairs were conducted in a manner increasingly illogical and erratic, for the Hansa towns were unable to present a united front to other powers. By 1512, the most important areas of the Low Countries had seceded, in fact if not in law. No concession was made to the maritime provinces of the Netherlands of those reciprocal privileges which would again have brought them securely within the union and prevented their alliance with Denmark on the basis of a mutual grievance against the North German cities. In effect, the Hansa suffered simultaneously the amputation of a vital member and the aggression of a dangerous rival.