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# Absent Culture

The Case of Polish Livonia

## Polish Studies - Transdisciplinary Perspectives

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# Introduction

## The Re-creation of a Nonexistent Land

### 1. Theses on Absence

This book must start with a simple and troubling statement: Polish Livonia does not exist. In Polish writing and scholarship spanning over four and a half centuries, a stubborn seeker will find only a few volumes containing the term “Livonia” in the title (and the referent will not always be Polish Livonia). Reading these volumes will offer our reader a vague concept of their subject—one filled with hidden tensions, obstinate omissions and local patriots’ appeals which summon the world to notice this exotic land, located in the borderlands of the borderlands. Our seeker will not find a separate chapter called “Polish Livonia”<sup>1</sup> in any of the major contemporary scholarly works on Polish history, and he will notice that the Livonian Wars described in textbooks apparently take place in an unspecified region between Vilnius, Riga and Tartu. Gustaw Manteuffel, the most eminent historian of the Livonian lands, and author of countless historical, ethnographic, travel-related, and cultural publications, does not figure in the contemporary *Leksykon historii Polski* [Lexicon of Polish History] at all,<sup>2</sup> and none of his works have been reprinted in the last hundred years. Some fundamentally important works concerning the history and culture of Livonia have remained in manuscript form, and the possibility of their publication appears increasingly remote.<sup>3</sup> One could keep multiplying such examples, but instead it should suffice to mention that even very erudite scholars

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- 1 Among significant exceptions here there are works like Andrzej Chwalba’s *Historia Polski 1795–1918* [The History of Poland, 1795–1918] (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000), in which an entire chapter is dedicated to the Polish episode in the history of old Latvia; it is, however, marked by a certain conceptual confusion.
  - 2 See Michał Czajka, Marcin Kamler, and Witold Sienkiewicz, *Leksykon historii Polski* [Lexicon of Polish History] (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1995).
  - 3 See, for example, Kazimierz Konstanty Broel-Plater, “Dzieje Królestwa Polskiego za Stanisława Augusta” [The History of the Polish Kingdom under the Reign of Stanisław August Poniatowski], n.d. (this work, which seems to have been lost, consisted of 16 manuscript volumes!); Michał Świerbiński, “Martyrologia Infantów Polskich” [The Martyrology of Polish Livonia] (Warsaw, 1937), 57, PAN Archive.

tend to associate Livonia exclusively with an anecdote from Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trylogia* [Trilogy]; indeed, a fusion of two separate anecdotes often takes place, and in the geo-historical imagination of some humanities scholars there is an inclination to locate Livonia in the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Its enigmatic existence is well-illustrated by toponomastic variations, since—depending on the time period, political configuration, and cultural orientation of the author—this region has been given a wide variety of designations: Liwonia, Livonia australis, Southern Livonia, Liflandia (Lyfflandya), the Voivodeship (Duchy) of Livonia, Vitebsk Governorate, Daugava Land, Western Baltic Colony, Livonian Borderlands, Latgale, and Eastern Latvia. And these are only the terms that appear in Polish-language texts. Vagueness of concepts blurs the contours of being.

Our second statement is a consequence of the first, and it is simultaneously an attempt to deny it: Polish Livonia has been attempting to come into existence. The most easily perceptible common feature, the link which connects Livonian writings which are otherwise very diverse, is the intention to represent Livonia as a self-subsistent and a politically, historically, and culturally autonomous land whose “otherness” derives from the specific pedigree of the local aristocracy (Polonized German knights) and the privileges granted to Livonians in the so-called *Pacta Subjectionis*, and, above all, in the *Privilegium Sigismundi Augusti* of King Sigismundus II Augustus. It is also said to derive from fervent defense of the Catholic faith, and from adamant patriotism, which went hand in hand with sentimental admiration of local landscapes. The obstinate process of differentiation observable in these texts takes on truly dramatic proportions when contrasted with the tendency to simply omit Livonia as an inconvenient and somewhat embarrassing chapter of Polish history. This tendency includes not only certain selection biases among historians who could be seen as

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4 The saying about “selling Livonia” has two sources. In the third volume of Sienkiewicz's *Potop* [The Deluge], when the Swedish army lays siege to Zamość, Sir Zagłoba proposes that the town's prefect should, in return for the Lublin Voivodeship which had already been returned to him (and where he already ruled), offer Carl Gustav the Netherlands, which Sweden fought for in vain during the Thirty Years' War (Henryk Sienkiewicz, *Potop* [The Deluge], vol. 3, chap. 3). In another place the same Zagłoba demands Livonia and money from the Swedes, this time in exchange for peace: “Let them give up Livonia and give us their fortunes, and we shall leave them in peace.” (Ibid., chap. 7). In both cases Livonia is an object of bargaining, a commodity to be exchanged; it does not have a specified value, and the transaction itself has suspect and caricature-like character.

submissive to various political interests,<sup>5</sup> but also the attitude commonly encountered among politically-inclined gentry—deputies to the *sejm* [parliament] of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th and 18th centuries—who clearly demonstrated their *desinteressement* regarding the Livonians. Ignorance in this matter existed among both external observers, and inhabitants of the region themselves, as Jan August Hylzen put it in emphatic and charmingly flowery words:

It is not on account of the rashness of fleeting private considerations, from which my mind and my condition remain far removed, but specifically for the sake of the public good, for the honor of the Livonian Nation, for the proof and confirmation of the laws and prerogatives which serve the Citizens who live there, that as a Livonian, I present Livonia before the Poles in Polish, in a comprehensive characterization. Because I have observed that in political conversations, diverse as they happen to be, when Livonia's revolutions and its form of government and laws are brought up—both the old form from the Teutonic era and the mediocre one from after the Union with the Commonwealth—not only otherwise good men from among the Commonwealth's Citizenry, but even native Livonians themselves often stumble, or fall altogether silent.<sup>6</sup>

Gustaw Manteuffel fought for the existence of this land in a similar spirit when he accused Poles that they knew less about Livonia than about Sumatra or Borneo. It is worth listening to his grievances because they illustrate the power of the complexes of the local intelligentsia—complexes which fed on a profound sense of injustice and rejection:

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5 This is how one should understand, for example, Warsaw historians' resistance against Gustaw Manteuffel's *Zarysy z dziejów krain dawnych inflanckich* [Sketches from the History of Old Livonian Lands]; for a contemporary edition see Gustaw Manteuffel, *Zarysy z dziejów krain dawnych Inflanckich* [Sketches from the History of Old Livonian Lands], ed. Krzysztof Zajas (Krakow: Universitas, 2007). This work was accused of excessive bias and it was initially prevented from being published in its entirety. I discuss this more extensively in Chapter 4: "Project Livonia."

6 Jan August Hylzen, *Inflanty w dawnych swych i wielorakich aż do naszego wieku dziejach i rewolucjach; z wywodem godności i starożytności Szlachty tamecznej, tudzież praw i wolności z dawna i teraz jej służących zebrane i Polskiemu światu do wiadomości w Ojczystym języku podane* [Livonia in its old and diverse history and revolutions, extending up to our own era; with proofs of the dignity and immemorial history of the local Aristocracy, and with laws which served the gentry of old and still serve them today, collected and presented to the Polish world in its Native language] (Vilnius: Drukarnia Akademicka, 1750), A2. To make reading easier, I use contemporary transcriptions of this and other citations from older Polish literature; I respect, however, the authors' intentions in their use of small and capital letters. Contemporary English is used in the translated version of the titles.

It would seem that these borderlands, initially hidden under the protective wings of the Commonwealth, stained with much Polish blood and blood of their own sons who turned the tide of victory in our favor, or themselves routed our enemies at Kirchholm, Goldynga, etc.—that these lands which, at least in small part, have been inhabited by Poles, should interest us greatly. Yet one must confess that we have always sinned by a more particular kind of indifference which is difficult to explain when talking about the fate of the inhabitants of the eastern shores of the Baltic; we thereby continue, in a sense, the traditional politics of our forefathers who, having started a war with their northern neighbor, conducted it with unforgivable slothfulness, and in the end left the Livonians, who were exhausted by the struggle that lasted many years, to the mercy of the happy and vital invaders.<sup>7</sup>

According to the author, the political mistake of his contemporaries consists in making it possible for the partitioning powers to fight over Livonia, as the Commonwealth had done three centuries earlier, when it had turned its attention away from the Baltic countries to the south—an action diligently exploited by Sweden and Moscow. Besides tones of lament, in this fragment one can easily discern traces of the split identity of the Livonians, who admittedly place themselves under the “wings of the Commonwealth” but whose blood is not Polish but “their own” (that is “local,” knightly-Teutonic as one could surmise, but essentially also heeding from elsewhere). Manteuffel, who came from the aristocracy, which settled in Livonia in the 18th century, speaks of them in the third person, that is, in the company of “his own,” he is the spokesman of “others.” These others are not, however, foreigners since they are fighting in their own land. Regional identity is thus subjected to turbulence in the encounter with national identity. Manteuffel’s “we” stands against the Baltic “they,” and contains a clear declaration of identification with Polishness—even though the historian belonged to the “native sons” of medieval Livonia, and spoke to the citizens of Lithuania and the Polish Crown in their name.

To this day, among the last descendants of Livonian families there lingers a conviction that they come from an unknown and forgotten region, a *nowhereland*, which must be described historically and geographically, at least in its broad outlines, before any personal recollections can begin.<sup>8</sup> One should

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7 Gustaw Manteuffel, *O starodawnej szlachcie krzyżacko-rycerskiej na kresach inflanckich* [On Ancient Teutonic Knightly Aristocracy in the Livonian Borderlands] (Lviv: Księgarnia Gubrynowicza, 1910), 5.

8 See Józef Weyssenhoff, *Kronika Rodziny Weyssów Weyssenhoffów zestawiona podług dokumentów przez Józefa Weyssenhoffa* [The Chronicle of the Weyss Weyssenhoff Family, Constructed by Józef Weyssenhoff on the Basis of Documentary Evidence], ed. Waldemar Weyssenhoff (Vilnius: Drukarnia Artystyczna, 1935), from which I refer to the introduction by Waldemar Weyssenhoff; Leon Broel-Plater, *Krasław* [Kraslava] (London: Broel-Plater, 1975), 5; Ryszard Manteuffel-Szoega, *Inflanty, Inflanty...*

thus see it as a particular local phenomenon that the sense of disappearance and incomplete existence of this territory in the general imagination has accompanied its inhabitants from the very beginning. The simple consequences of this included an obstinately constructed myth of separateness, meticulous patriotism and ceaselessly proclaimed loyalty to the king, fervent Catholicism, ostentatious aversion against Germans (Protestants) and Russians (barbarians), and finally a knightly aristocratic sense of injured pride, which went hand in hand with disregard for the common gentry and the peasants.

## Historical and political nonexistence

Problems with coming into existence attended Polish Livonia from the very beginning of its formation, and this process has never come to an end. Local gentry took pride in the fact that Livonia was united with the Polish-Lithuanian state not as a result of conquests, but through voluntary submission to the Polish Crown, which meant, in a sense, that the union took place on the basis of an agreeable choice.<sup>9</sup> The long process of specifying the political, legal, and administrative status of these lands began with the annexation of the territory by the Commonwealth in 1561. According to the incorporation pact, the king himself was in charge of Livonia, negotiations were conducted by Lithuanian deputies who planned to attach the new voivodeship to the Grand Duchy, while the Livonians themselves needed only the military commitment of Poland, which, for its part, kept a skeptical distance.<sup>10</sup> And so already at the moment of

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[Livonia, Livonia...], ed. Zbigniew Szopiński (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1991), 7–11.

- 9 One can see pride in this statement both in Hylzen's *Inflanty w dawnych swych dziejach* [*Livonia in its Ancient History*], A6, and in most of Manteuffel's historical works: e.g., Gustaw Manteuffel, "Inflanty Polskie poprzedzone ogólnym rzutem oka na siedmiowiekową przeszłość całych Inflant" [Polish Livonia, with a Brief Overview of the 700-year History of all of Livonia], in Manteuffel, *Pisma Wybrane* [Selected Writings], ed. Krzysztof Zajas, vol. 1 (Krakow: Universitas, 2009), 6; also Manteuffel's *O starodawnej szlachcie krzyżacko-rycerskiej* [On the Historic Knightly-Teutonic Aristocracy].
- 10 I discuss this further in the chapter entitled "The Polish History of Livonia." Here, I would like to refer the reader to the following studies: Edward Kuntze, "Organizacja Inflant w Czasach Polskich" [The Organization of Livonia during the Polish Period], in *Polska a Inflanty* [Poland and Livonia], vol. 39 of *Pamiętnik Instytutu Bałtyckiego* (Gdynia: Instytut Bałtycki w Gdyni, 1939); Jürgen Heyde, "Kość niezgody – Inflanty w polityce wewnętrznej Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVII wieku" [Bone of Contention: Livonia in the Domestic Politics of the Commonwealth between the 16th and 17th

its formation, Polish Livonia was an arena of conflicting and mutually exclusive interests. Their character was eminently instrumental, and the local citizens' oft-repeated declarations about a voluntary union with the Polish Crown should be treated as an unsuccessful attempt at blackmail, which only later gained the status of virtue in the works of chroniclers.<sup>11</sup>

Livonia's problems with historical existence were reinforced by the historiographical politics of its closest neighbors, whose writings minimized and eliminated Polish participation in the history and culture of old Latvia. The most advanced German-Baltic historiography saw its mission in terms of struggle for dominance and for monopoly of knowledge; it mentioned Polish influences reluctantly and with difficulty.<sup>12</sup> Nationalist tendencies which blossomed in the historical sciences in the second half of the 19th century played a part in this, but the tension reaches back to the time of the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Riga in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the elimination of the Polish presence on the banks of the Daugava River one can also see traces of the struggle for existence, since Baltic Germans also wrestled with nonexistence in the history of Germany, and they share some of their dilemmas with the Poles.<sup>13</sup>

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Centuries], in *Prusy i Inflanty między średniowieczem a nowożytnością: państwo – społeczeństwo – kultura* [Prussia and Livonia between the Middle Ages and Modernity: State, Society, Culture], ed. Bogusław Dybaś and Dariusz Makieła (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2003), 159–168; Enn Tarvel, “Stosunek prawnopaństwowy Inflant do Rzeczypospolitej oraz ich ustrój administracyjny w latach 1561–1621” [Livonia's State and Legal Relations with the Commonwealth, and its Administrative Structures between 1561 and 1621], *Zapiski Historyczne* 34, no. 1 (1969): 49–77.

11 See Heyde, “Kość Niezgody – Inflanty w Polityce Wewnętrznej Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVII wieku” [Bone of Contention: Livonia in the Domestic Politics of the Commonwealth between the 16th and 17th Centuries], 165.

12 It is impossible to find Gustav Manteuffel's name in most German scholarly works, even though he published much in German; for example, he began his passionate work as an historian with the book *Polnisch Livland* [Polish Livonia], published in Dresden in 1869. One can find a peculiar example of this in Arnold Feuereisen's *Livländische Geschichtsliteratur* [Livonian Historical Literature], Riga, 1908—a work which discusses the entire historical literature concerning Livonia, but which does not include Manteuffel, who was Feuereisen's contemporary and author of *Inflanty Polskie* [Polish Livonia], but which does include Teresa Wodzicka née Potocki's marginal work “Z ostatnich dni Polski i Kurlandii: Pamiętniki barona Karola Henryka Heykinga 1752 do 1796” [The Final Days of Poland and Courland: Baron Karol Henryk Heyking's Memoirs, 1752–1796], *Przegląd Polski* 1 (1905). Exceptions like August Bielenstein or the 20th-century researcher Herta von Ramm-Helmsing only prove this rule.

13 The most exhaustive analysis of this tendency has been provided recently by Armin von Ungern-Sternberg in his impressive work entitled “*Erzählregionen*”: *Überlegungen zu*

In turn, in the period immediately after the partitions, tsarist censorship prohibited the use of the name “Polish Livonia” in printed publications (it was for this reason that Manfeuffel published his foundational work in Poznan); with time, Russification-related repressions were transformed into physical annihilation of Livonian Polishness, and its replacement by the Russian and Belarusian population.

The leveling factor had a somewhat different character in the framework of Latvian historiography. During the interwar period, this historiography sought to describe, or rather create anew, Latvian history in opposition to the writings of all the colonizers; it drew a wide arc between the pre-Christian medieval era and 19th-century aspirations to independence, ignoring the seven-hundred-year presence of other cultures on Latvian lands.<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, Gustaw Manteuffel—who in his youth was an avid collector of Latgallian songs and an author of calendars written in the local language—appears not as a local historian, but as one of the fathers of the Latvian language and literature. It is only in recent years that a new generation of historians has emerged; historians who explore Polish writings in search of materials for a multicultural history of Latvia.<sup>15</sup> For decades, the problem of Latvian historiography consisted in the narrow-minded conviction that it should develop independently from the influences and pressures of the literatures of its former invaders (which is right), and that it should therefore minimize and reduce the themes introduced by these literatures (which is erroneous). In the eyes of its creators, the history of Latvia was thus to confirm Latvia’s existence, much as the existence of Polish, German, Swedish, or Russian Livonia needed confirmation in earlier times. The history of the lands which interest us is thus a theater of competing national historiographical perspectives.

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*literarischen Räumen mit Blick auf die deutsche Literatur des Baltikums, das Baltikum und die deutsche Literatur* [“Regions of Narration”: Reflections about Literary Spaces with a Glance at the German Literature of the Baltic Countries, at the Baltic Countries, and at German Literature] (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2003), and especially the chapter “Selbstdarstellung des baltischen Raumes” [Self-representation of the Baltic Space].

- 14 The historical work of a native Latgallian, Bolesław Breżgo, who writes in Latvian, Russian, and Polish, is a commendable exception here.
- 15 The many years of work carried out by the Rīgas historian Ēriks Jēkabsons are invaluable in this respect; he scrupulously examined the Polish materials available in the Latvian State Historical Archive in Riga, and published the results in “Polak na Łotwie” [A Pole in Latvia]. In his monograph about “Polish Latvia,” however, the name “Polish Livonia” does not appear at all, and in its place there appear such interesting terms as “the Polish period” or “Transdaugava” [Transdźwińsk]—see Ēriks Jēkabsons, *Poļi Latvijā* [Polish Latvia] (Rīga: Etnisko pētījumu centrs, 1996), 9–11 and 136.