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# INTRODUCTION

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## Gdańsk: A Baltic Borderland Perspective

This special issue focusing on Gdańsk as a Baltic borderland collates a series of papers presented at an interdisciplinary workshop held in October 2021 at the Artus Court in Gdańsk. The workshop brought together scholars from Poland and the United Kingdom to focus on two aspects: first, that the appropriation of Gdańsk is a double -sided memory for Germans and Poles; second, Gdańsk as an Eastern and Northern European centre of power, trade, and culture.

It is the nature of workshops to identify and discuss a broad range of issues, and the main task of this introduction is to identify, contextualise, and discuss touchpoints in common threads in the papers at hand. Before we embark on this task, however, it is helpful to provide a working definition of borderlands, some key concepts, and to problematise these within different contexts of Gdańsk's history.

When researchers today speak about borderlands in the context of Gdańsk's history, they reference a place limited by a fairly limited time and space. After World War I, Poland was re -established as a sovereign state and the League of Nations granted Poland access to the sea via the Polish corridor. Located in this was the Free City of Gdańsk, with its historic port and harbour and surrounding region. Here is the problem: If we limit ourselves to the geographic space of this corridor, we reduce the history of Danzig to the history of an enclave wedged between Germany, Poland and the Baltic Sea.[1] Temporal limits also come into view: Since borders express the political, social, and cultural ordering at a specific point in time, the Polish corridor represents a relatively short two decades in the centuries -long

[1] Elizabeth Morrow Clarke, "The Free City of Danzig: Borderland, Hansestadt or Social Democracy," *The Polish Review* 42/3 (1997): 260.

history of Gdańsk – and its surrounding region. Over the centuries, Gdańsk played a significant role in the context of the Hanseatic League as well as in the histories of Prussia, the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, the German lands, Great Britain, the Russian Empire, and later of course a re-established Poland. Gdańsk was always an important part of the Baltic Sea region, but during the interwar period as its geopolitical significance grew, it never relinquished its heritage of important historic trading links with other important trading cities ranging from Amsterdam and London in the West, Stockholm and the North and Riga and Saint Petersburg in the East.

Focusing on such a narrow two-decade window in the longer history of the city and its surrounding region means we will fail to take into account the different cultural layers that left their imprint over the longer term on the city through royal, imperial, regional, and local rulers. How then to unlock this broad historical footprint and cultural complexity that arguably still exists today? One innovative analytical framework is to examine Gdańsk's longer history through the lens or analytical framework of the borderland.

What is a borderland and why is it important? A borderland emerges wherever two or more cultures come together – peacefully or violently. This basic definition is based on several post-modern studies that have addressed the shifting impact of cultural, political, and social boundaries. These gain significance against the backdrop of new national borders, migration, integration and globalisation. In the study of borderlands, moreover, the focus should always be on what unites rather than divides, and for this reason researchers today understand the concept as something that extends well beyond the great fence or wall, or the ink border printed on a map. Borders, moreover, need not necessarily assume spatial, or material form. Borders and the resulting borderlands can also be based on administrative, linguistic, religious, professional, artistic, and other cultural encounters which complicate as well as challenge national, personal, and group identities in general. Borderland experiences extend to ethnic and religious enclaves within a single city or institutions such as CIQ, or passport control on trains, at train stations, as well as at ports and airports. These experiences moreover contributed to a borderlandisation in everyday situations where questions are constantly subject to renegotiation: Who am I? Where do I belong? What specific values do I favour? What language should I communicate in?

Borderland experiences have also been transformed by the fall of the Iron Curtain and the weakening of national boundaries as well as stepped-up integration in the European Union. As a result of their ever-changing value in ordering societies, one can recognise their temporal dimension.[2] Let us not forget that de-and re-bordering have shaped societies for centuries. That is why it is necessary

[2] Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003).

for borderland research to develop specific concepts of space, place, and cultural touchpoints. In the following, this section introduces a few key concepts associated with borders and borderlands. While introducing and explaining these in the following, they shall be brought into dialogue with the longer history of Gdańsk, Poland, Europe and the Baltic Sea region at large. The first of these is the idea of a frontier which many mistakenly use as a synonym for border.

The concept of the **frontier** was originally formulated in the context of studying conflicts at the fringes of Latin Christendom, specifically in fighting and killing the "infidels'.[3] It first and foremost references a line of conflict or battle, but it can also be brought into association with forced cultural exchange, social inequality, colonisation, and specifically taken as a crusading ideal with wars against and defeat of the infidels. As a concept, the frontier remains a ready analytical framework, and survives in the study of the ever-shifting North American frontier or the Imperial boundary in East Asia. Today, however, researchers have extended the idea of the frontier beyond geographical space to include the peaceful or forceful exchanges of mind and culture.

A second key concept is the **state border.** This developed alongside the idea of sovereignty and the ruler's territoriality (Landeshoheit), especially after the Reformation of the 16th century. The state border references an enclosed geographic area that increasingly features a single, homogenised space for religion, economic activity, and law. Wars, treaties, legal instruments routinely negotiated and confirmed state borders. The Treaty of Melno in 1422 provided the guidelines for the annual inspection of the border between the grand Duchy of Lithuania and Prussia.[4] The treaties comprising the Peace of Westphalia (1648) offer good early-modern examples of defining state borders, such as those of the Dutch Republic. But we should always remain mindful that early modern states were legally messy, with idiosyncrasies arising from personal unions, wars, marriages, gifts, or endowments. A special challenge arises from the study of religious persecution, migration or intellectual networking – these phenomena do not (necessarily) align with state borders. They may even thrive – such as in the case of smuggling – by simply ignoring such borders.

The **nation state border** represents an additional facet in the development of state borders where these borders are connected to the evolving idea of the nation state. In the tradition of Western Europe, this development is connected to the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the reactions thereunto, in other words broadly situated in a period that straddles the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The significance of the nation state border grew especially

[3] David Abulafia, "Introduction, Seven Types of Ambiguity," in: *Medieval Frontiers. Concepts and Practices,* eds. David Abulafia, Nora Berend (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), 1–34; *Frontiers in Question. Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, eds. Daniel Power, Naomi Standen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

[4] Steven Christopher Rowell, "The Lithuano-Prussian Forest Frontier, c. 1422–1600," in: *Frontiers in Question,* 183–185.

when the members of a given nation began to identify themselves more closely with the territories on which they were living.[5] The nation, thus, grew out of the relations of its members with each other as well as from the ability of these members to imagine that they belong to this group.[6] A nation, in other words, is a "conceived order set up by nationalism and its adherents as a sovereign entity'.[7] But what about the case of the lands of the southern and eastern Baltic Sea? For this reason, the western European course and narrative of nation state building is of little immediate relevance. This is because nation-state building in this region substantially took place more than a century later, namely in the aftermath of the First World War. While Czarina Catherine the Great and her successors strengthened their grip over the Baltic provinces after 1783, Poland-Lithuania disappeared for more than a century after the third partition in 1795. The Polish, Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian nation-states were only established after the First World War.[8] During "wars of independence," the newly founded Latvian and Estonian governments backed by their populations could save their new eastern and southern state borders in 1919 and 1920. Lithuanian nation building was overshadowed by Polish attempts to revive the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as well as an attack in 1920 that moved the Polish-Lithuanian border into Lithuanian heartlands. A League of Nations agreement from 1923 fixed the border between Kaunas and Vilnius.[9] Poland's eastern borders were much more difficult to secure than the western one after the proclamation of the so-called second Polish Republic in 1918. While the victorious allies in the Paris treaty dictated the run of the western border with the highly industrialised areas of Silesia on the Polish side, opened the eastern border uncertain room for manoeuvre of the new Polish government under Józef Piłsudski. However (un-) successful this was, the new state borders were fixed by 1923 and the delicate task of nation-building could begin against the historical backdrop of foreign rule and the partitions. In fulfilling this task, one specific border concept moved into the limelight: **phantom borders**. By this term we understand former political borders that are no longer relevant in terms of international or state law, but continue to impact societies in certain ways.[10]

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[6] Miroslav Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 20.

[7] Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Nationalismus, Geschichte, Formen, Folgen* (München: Beck, 2001), 13.

[8] Rudolf Jaworski, Christian Lübke, Michael G. Müller, *Eine kleine Geschichte Polens* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000). On the relationship of nation and territory see: Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2009), 582.

[9] Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 300–306.

[10] Michael G. Müller, Kai Struve, "Einleitung," in: Michael G. Müller, Kai Struve, *Fragmentierte Republik, Das politische Erbe der Teilungszeit in Polen 1918–1939* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017), 10.

The first phase of nation building ended with a new partition between Nazi Germany and Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. The three Baltic States were occupied by the red army in 1940 and incorporated into the Soviet Union. Locked up behind the **Iron Curtain** after World War II, the Baltic States remained constituent republics of the USSR under the direct rule of Moscow, while Poland returned as a troubled and involuntary communist state in the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc.

After the fall of the Iron curtain, borderlands of the southern and eastern Baltic were transformed from no-man's lands into contact zones. The fall of the Berlin Wall and later the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened up **borderlands** with a newfound dynamism. Marking the weaker, outer edges of states, these borderlands suddenly became contact zones for mercantile and political exchange that not only nourished innovation, but also revitalised nation-building processes across the southern and eastern Baltic Sea region. Formerly "alienated borderlands" with almost no cross-border traffic turned into "interdependent" and "integrated borderlands."[11] The Baltic Sea reappeared in regional structures which had come into creation since the establishment of HELCOM in 1974, but most initiatives were created after the end of the Soviet Union, including the establishment of the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 1992. The "open borders paradigm" of the 1990s did not render national borders obsolete, but rather altered the border regimes across the Baltic Sea region and especially in the former Soviet republics and states of the Warsaw Pact. Political rapprochement with the West spawned labour migration, tourism and trade in a maritime region that featured substantial disparities in wealth and gross national income. Greater mobility and opportunities facilitated cultural encounters at all levels of society including educational exchanges, artistic interaction, and technology transfer.

The concept of the **borderscape** can be taken as an extension of the borderland, and represents the next step in borderland research. The borderscape is where state or national boundaries acquire an ordering function alongside other borders, including religious, ethnic, social, or economic. The study of borderscapes shifts the research focus from borders to bordering processes in larger socio-cultural contexts while also taking various power asymmetries into consideration. While the borderscape has served as a conceptual tool of analysis in the study of sociology and geography, particularly in the context of post-Soviet Eastern European borderlands,[12] historians have only recently begun to examine cultural encounters in this way. Of special interest are the borderlands between East and West in the Baltic Sea region.

Let us summarise the main concepts introduced so far: this section has introduced and briefly discussed with reference to Poland and the Baltic Sea region

[11] Oscar J. Martinez, *Border People. Life and Society in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 5–10.

[12] Nira Yuval-Davis, Georgy Wemyss, Kathryn Cassidy, *Bordering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

several terms and ideas that serve to conceptualise and help to analyse different facets of the borderlands. Borderlands are more than just emerging but shifting political boundaries, they are multifaceted and multidimensional constructs that serve to order society. The main concepts introduced are the frontier, the state and national border, the borderland, the phantom border and the borderscape. With reference to the Baltic Sea region in general, nation building and concomitantly the creation of national borders was a phenomenon that began later in the Eastern Baltic than in western and central Europe.

How are these relevant or applicable to Gdańsk? As discussed, each of these concepts has had their time and context in the longer history of the city and its surrounding region. This forms the thematic and conceptual cornerstone of the present collection comprising seventeen essays. Taken as a whole they make an original contribution to borderland studies broadly defined by examining the urban history of Gdańsk and its regional dimension from the perspective of borderland studies, resulting in new perspectives and vista points across time as well as across academic disciplines. The collection, ordered chronologically from the Hanseatic League through to the 2022 Russian War in Ukraine adds value in that Gdańsk is not just studied as an urban space, but that the city reinvented itself as a multi-layered cultural construct whose identity, reputation, and cultural vibrancy was shaped and reshaped over time through different frontier and bordering processes. How more specifically does Gdańsk fit into this history of frontiers, borders and borderlands? On the one hand, geography and political bordering create a geopolitical framework in which Gdańsk developed as maritime trading hub with a vast hinterland. This city and hinterland were connected through trading routes deep into the Ukrainian Rus that helped to form a community of fate. On the other hand, the trading connections and the riches deriving therefrom nurtured over centuries the participation of Gdańsk's citizens in cultural, academic and social networks that placed the port city at the centre of the Baltic Sea region in ever changing imperial, national and regional borderland contexts.

Each of the essays draws directly or indirectly on one or more of the concepts developed above. The papers have been ordered chronologically, starting with Gdańsk in the age of the Hanseatic League and ending with the 2022 Russian War in Ukraine. The following presents a contextualised brief summary of the individual papers.

## Summary of the papers

Gdańsk's Baltic borderland history has been determined by a traditional marker of frontiers and borders in the landscapes of the Middle Ages, a fortress which rested on Pomerelian (Eastern Pomeranian) remnants of a tenth century

wooden castle transformed by the Teutonic Knights into a residence in 1310.[13] Until 1308 a town in the principality of the Polish Piast dynasty, Gdańsk was taken by the Teutonic Knights who since 1226 had been fighting a crusade in Prussia, and in the process became an unforeseen but enduring threat to Polish borders for centuries. It is the German settlement – not just with respect to Gdańsk and Pomerania generally, but also the southern Polish heartlands together with Wrocław, Poznań and Kraków – which established the specifically German history of the city.[14] Beyond the question of rule and migration, however, the frontiers of the city were complex. They comprised not only a maritime network, reaching from the Netherlands and Britain to Sweden and Novgorod, but also an overland trading network that reached deep into its vast hinterland from the wilderness of Lithuania and the Rus down to the Black Sea. The merchants of the Hanseatic League and the membership in this mercantile network shaped administrative structures as much as commercial exchange. Both were based on the same legal and cultural premises that characterised Hanseatic cities in the 14th and 15th centuries. The law of Lübeck, red brick building traditions and the habitual use of Low German provided a familiar scene across the Baltic Sea region. In a similar vein, **Beata Możejko** highlights how Hanseatic merchants laid the cornerstone for a successful town management in Gdańsk. Her focus on the symbolism developed by influential families provides a noteworthy example of social bordering processes that helped shape a regional identity that would endure for centuries. This Hanseatic identity is also part of **Małgorzata Omilanowska's** discussion of German Neo-Renaissance in Gdańsk's architecture of the late 19th century. Gdańsk officials sought to revitalise the symbolism and cultural legacy of the local bourgeoisie in conjunction with a new German imperial identity. Nationalistic interpretations of this architectural legacy obscure the fact that for centuries the city was neither exclusively nor distinctly German or Polish.

From the middle of the 15th to the end of the 18th century, Gdańsk formed part of the multi-ethnic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a dual state in which the Jagiellonian dynasty of Lithuania made themselves into European rulers on the Polish, Bohemian and also Hungarian thrones. Royal and ducal power – with their courts based in Kraków and Vilnius – relied on magnates and nobles who exercised supremacy at local and regional levels,[15] cementing internal borders and leaving the "ukraina" untouched as a frontier. Among the dynasties who came to the throne are the Swedish Vasa and the electors of Saxony. Several accounts have described this united realm as a religious borderland. Orthodox

[13] Tomasz Torbus, *Zamki krzyżackie – Deutschordensburgen* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2010), 68.

[14] Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*: *Volume I: The Origins to 1795* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 65, 74–75.

[15] *Idem*, *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* (London, New York: Allan Lane, Penguin Books, 2011), 265.

Christianity reached Lithuania from the Bosphorus, while Latin Christianity (not least through the Crusades of the Teutonic Knights) made inroads into the Polish heartland. The Baltic shores became the focus of Danish and Northern German bishops. Jews had a presence in Poland-Lithuania and were expanding as a group through migrations from the west. Pagans resisted Christianisation for centuries, and Islam arrived with the Tartars from the South-eastern frontier. Protestants arrived in this evolving religious borderscape with the Reformation in the 16th century. The first reformed preachers were active in Gdańsk as early as 1518, captivating the hearts of the poor citizens as much as the urban patricians. **Volha Barysenka** shows how in 16th century Poland-Lithuania, the Catholics and the Orthodox observed the rise of the Protestants by drawing on sermons and religious discourses with specific reference to the cult of the Virgin Mary. Images of the Virgin Mary were used during the Counter-Reformation and, as is argued by **Mirosław Kruk,** were condemned by the Protestants for their alleged supernatural properties. While iconoclasm characterised early Protestantism, Kruk also highlights that the Gdańsk bourgeoise took a surprisingly relaxed attitude toward large religious paintings at the Artus Court. Religious affairs in Gdańsk, however, became increasingly politicised through tensions between the city's patriciate and the Polish king. Protestantism became an important factor in defending Gdańsk's privileges. Sigismund I and later Sigismund Augustus worked to curb the power and wealth of Gdańsk. Stephan Batory took similar steps, but drove the Gdańsk patriciate into the proverbial arms of the Danes and the city's citizenry into anti-Catholic riots as well as pushing the city of Gdańsk into a war against the Polish crown and the rival city of Elbląg. In the end, Gdańsk's privileges were restored in return for additional funds that were levied on trade and were ceded to the royal treasury.[16] Gdańsk saw the need to safeguard its prosperity via its trading privileges. In the 17th century, the Polish kings would station the royal navy at Gdańsk, played with the city's neutrality, and compromised its reliability in the Baltic maritime networks. Dynastic rivalries, together with the Livonian and Thirty Years" War, further stressed the trading networks and the city's economy.

Privileges went hand in hand with a stable and comfortable trading environment across the Baltic Sea region. The Great Northern War of 1700–1721 significantly changed the balance of power in the region. Also, the rise of national interests in an increasingly politicised economy challenged the traditional networks of the Hanseatic merchants and curtailed the authority of local elites, particularly in Estonia, Ingria and Livonia, who had to adapt to new rulers in Moscow. **Arkadiusz Janicki** provides an overview of the Russian empire's rise as a major regional power, specifically by focusing on how this rise was received by shifting alliances of the British, Swedes and Poles. The czar's lust for power in the Baltic

[16] Edmund Cieślak, Czesław Biernat, *History of Gdansk* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1995), 130–153.

at the beginning of the 18th century induced the British observers and the government to exercise great caution. Mistrust of Russian imperial ambitions endured well into the 19th century, as the study of British newspapers by **Iwona Sakowicz-Tebinka** argues. Britain's caution in the 18th century was conditioned by its economic interests in the region. Britain obtained essential naval stores in Riga, St. Petersburg and also Gdańsk. **Hugo Bromley** shows how British merchants at the factory in St. Petersburg and London interfered with the negotiations for the 1766 Anglo-Russian treaty of Commerce. Highlighting government aims in these sometimes asymmetric negotiations, Bromley shows how the old Hanseatic mercantile network was slowly undermined. This was achieved by moving "national" interests to the forefront. Political economy changed the basis for trade treaties and thereby solidified commercial, social and cultural frontiers which were driven by merchants then as now by officials of the state. Cities like Gdańsk felt the pressure of emerging national systems and political economy. They feared to lose – as in the case of Gdańsk – their privileges in neighbouring cities like Elbląg which profited from the state-driven support of Fredrick II, who isolated Gdańsk following the first partition of Poland-Lithuania in 1773.[17]

The disappearance of a substantial European power in the course of the 19th century altered the balance of power in the Baltic Sea region that after 1795 was shaped by Russian, Prussian, Danish, Swedish and British interests. The (b)ordering[18] of the economic space of the Baltic Sea region increasingly became an objective of national and alliance politics with the result that ships had to fly the right flag. The situation deteriorated further during the Napoleonic period. Having drawn up a plan to transform Gdańsk into a centre of French control of the Baltic Sea, Napoleon Bonaparte made Gdańsk a Free City and reintroduced outdated processes and institutions to the city government. Economic success, however, failed to materialise. Old connections, particularly those with Britain, were severed with the Continental Blockade, thus jeopardising British interests in the Baltic Sea region. In their examination for and against the "Second Bombardment of Copenhagen," **Brendan Simms and Thomas Peak** argue that with reference to the Baltic Sea region, the British had their backs to the wall. More importantly, since sovereignty formed the cornerstone for relations between states, the arguments expounded by the British for and against the law of nations vs. the law of nature evidence in this case that the fragility of the emerging international law was the harbinger of a new order in which geopolitics played a more important role.

[17] Michael North, *The Baltic. A history* (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 150.

[18] *B/ordering Space*, eds. Henk van Houtum, Oliver Kramsch, Wolfgang Zierhofer (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

The numerous frontiers of conflict we have been reassessing here in the light of Gdańsk as a Baltic borderland may bear false witness of Gdańsk as a city driven by war and mercantilism only. That is not the case. Gdańsk was also the home of great scientists and artists and thus helped build an intellectual network that spanned across Europe. Intellectual contacts transcended frontiers, lines of conflict and state borders, and helped to create scientific and artistic spaces that formed part of the cultural memory of the city as well. **Anna Sobecka** outlines the role of eminent scholars from Gdańsk who became members of a Republic of Letters, such as Johann Hevelius and his wife Elizabeth, Jacob Breyne, Christopher Gottwald and Johann Adam Kulmus. Their findings fuelled academic discourse in the research nodes of Sweden, Britain, the Netherlands and Germany. These academic networks that leaned toward the West overlapped with networks that expanded both Northwards and Eastwards to include artists and architects who worked at the courts of Sweden's Queen Christina, and later Russia's Czarina Catherine the Great. **Rosalind P. Blakesley** examines the "semantic power of portraiture" by scrutinising the works of two artists, Anna Rosina Lisiewska and Vigilius Eriksen, who combine the virtues of artistic excellence with privileged access to the courts and nobility across the region.

World War I and the Russian Revolution fundamentally altered the borders in the Eastern Baltic Sea region. Poland became an independent nation and a geopolitical entity, though initially with ill-defined borders.[19] Finland together with the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania embarked on their initial phase of nation-building as sovereign and independent states. Gdańsk was impacted in several ways: the city was claimed by two countries, Poland and Germany, but for different reasons. Poland wanted Gdańsk to serve as its main port while Germany claimed the city because the majority of the population were ethnic Germans. International actors were unable to settle on a clear solution: little trust was placed in Germany that had just been vanquished in the First World War, but there were also doubts about Poland that had been recently become independent and had no track record.[20] To address these doubts, the Paris Peace Conference made Gdańsk a Free City – the second time in its history that the port city enjoyed such a status. As a result, the city became a special borderland: culture merged with geopolitics, nationalist rhetoric and commercial interests to create

[19] Historiography has focussed usually on the western borders which have been confirmed in the Paris Peace treaty. The eastern borders of the second republic, however, only solidified by force and in connection with the Ukrainian and Belarussian questions. With the peace of Riga in 1921 parts of Volhynia and Galicia became Polish territory, Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569–1999* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003), 140; Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland: Volume II: 1795 to the present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 292.

[20] Norman Davies, *God's Playground, Volume II*, 289, 291; Edmund Cieślak, Czesław Biernat, *History of Gdansk*, 444–445.

an autonomous city. A Polish Commissioner-General ensured that Polish interests over Gdańsk were safeguarded, while the League of Nation High Commissioner grew into a position that was filled by British diplomats, especially in the early years. As **Donatas Kupčiūnas** underscores, this is remarkable insofar as a poorly informed political elite in London were sceptical that an independent Polish state could survive and thus voiced opposition to incorporating Gdańsk into Poland. Such a position however, was drowned out by other voices in London that wanted a strong Poland to balance power in the region. British pessimism was arguably unfounded as Poland grew and aspired to become a Baltic nation. **Marta Grzechnik** argues how narratives surrounding modernity and becoming a "gateway to the world" shaped the new borderland by establishing Gdynia as Poland's main port. In response to the constraints and quarrels that tainted Poland's cooperation with Gdańsk's magistrates, Gdynia emerged as a port city with its own dynamism and contributed significantly to Poland's GDP. Slogans like "Gdynia is Poland" served to strengthen confidence in the port and at the same time helped Poland to stand its ground against German corridor rhetoric. Both "propagandas" emphasise the geostrategic importance of Gdynia and the competitive relations between Germany and Poland which were imposed on Gdynia and Gdańsk.

The interwar period emerged as an ambivalent time for (re-)bordering and had unexpected influence on economic growth and nation building. International relations based on new institutions such as the League of Nations were fragile. The League was challenged in coping with rising tensions between states that had been traumatised by war and long periods of foreign rule. Diplomacy in the 1930s, moreover, failed to ease those tensions in Eastern Europe. Fascist regimes fuelled exclusionary and inhumane racist language where members of the self-proclaimed "master race" increasingly oppressed minorities and dissenters. With the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP, "Nazis") gaining the majority in the Gdańsk senate in the elections of 1933, hostility grew especially toward the Jewish citizens of Gdańsk, who became systematically persecuted. **Krzysztof Ulanowski** exposes an anti-Semitic mindset that followed the template set in the German Reich and thrived on the spatial proximity of Gdańsk to Germany. In his analysis he also discusses the issues of home and belonging, especially since many of the Jewish familes of Gdańsk had lived in that city for centuries. Appeals by the Jewish communities to the League of Nation only temporarily appeased harassment, and after 1938 neither the League of Nations High Commissioner nor the Polish government could stem the persecution of the Jews.

The Polish Corridor was essentially tied to Polish sovereignty and access to the sea. Hitler sought to overturn the provisions of the Paris Peace Treaty and bring back Gdańsk and the Polish Corridor into the German Reich.[21] This step was completed four days after invading Poland on 5 September 1939. Gdańsk

[21] Norman Davies, *God's Playground, Volume II*, 319.

remained a part of the German Reich until the Red and Polish armies marched into the city on 28 March 1945.

After World War II Poland became a communist-ruled satellite of the Soviet Union and a member of the Warsaw Pact. In this period Gdańsk experienced both an identity crisis and its rebirth as a Polish city. This is the verdict reached by **Małgorzata Omilanowska** who examined the city's architectural heritage from this period. For now, Gdańsk had become concealed behind the Iron Curtain. With reference to the early years of the Cold War, **Jacek Tebinka** describes how London sought to reconnect to Gdańsk and the region through its consular presence. The British consulate, which served as an intelligence gathering post in the early phase of the Cold War, moved from Gdańsk to Gdynia. This move evidences not only the declining importance of Gdańsk as a port city, but also the waning influence that Britain held in the region. Although Gdynia at first continued to serve as the Polish "gateway to the world," Gdańsk experienced a revival as an economic and intellectual centre not just for Poland but soon also for the entire southern Baltic Sea region. As a movement, Solidarity was born at the Gdańsk Lenin Shipyard and its ideas of freedom spread despite the cruelty of an oppressive communist ideology as well as a corrupt and deluded nomenklatura. Recent attempts to tell history through the lens of turning points in 1977 or 1979[22] stimulated **Jacek Koltan** to identify 1980 as such a turning point for Gdańsk, the whole of the Eastern Bloc, and indeed the world. In recognising the importance of solidarity as an idea for both workers" movements in the East as well as for discourses of the intellectual left, Koltan contends that solidarity as revolutionary facet emerged in the crises of modernity. The impact of the movement and the discourse were quickly forgotten, and as a result 1980 does not feature among the aforementioned turning points. As a result, there remains in 2021 a firm Iron Curtain in terms of research and intellectual debate.

Gdańsk benefited from the fall of the Iron Curtain and the resulting economic, social and cultural opportunities. The city, together with Sopot and Gdynia, established itself as a liberal centre of Poland, a tourist hotspot for neighbouring countries in the Baltic Sea region, and a European university location. Shipping, the port and the cosmopolitanism of the Gdańsk people still play an important role in the city's identity and bear witness of the openness of borders in the 1990s and 2000s. However, this period of transition just took another turn for Gdańsk, Poland and the entire Baltic Sea region.

It wasn't a new Iron Curtain, but rather a new frontier that has appeared at the border of the European Union with Russia and Belarus. This new frontier impacts the entire region, and for now stimulates debates on the transformation of Eastern and Central Europe after 1990. **Olha Zavadska** discusses how

[22] Philipp Sarasin, *Eine kurze Geschichte der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2021); Christian Caryl, *Strange rebels, 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Russia's war in Ukraine is impacting international relations and shows how this conflict is transforming trans-regional discourses of space and borders. Are the effects being felt in Gdańsk? The answer is clearly affirmative, and not just on account of the sharp increase in energy costs or the number of Ukrainian refugees. On 17 September 2022, Poland reopened a still barely navigable canal that passes through the Vistula Spit and connects the Vistula Lagoon with Gdańsk Bay. The date – 17 September – is especially relevant symbolically, for it commemorates the violation of Polish sovereignty by Soviet troops in 1939. But what is so important about this canal? It enables ships to bypass Russian waters around the Kaliningrad exclave. Until now, ships could only reach the Gdańsk Bay via Baltiysk, and this meant that shipping was routinely harassed by Russian authorities. The Eastern borders, it would appear, are for now closing again, creating what could be dubbed an "alienated borderland" where little or no interaction takes place. Western democracies which since 1989–1991 also include many states of the Southern and Eastern Baltic Sea region are standing firm together despite the new lines of conflict, lingering ethnic frontiers and – as the pandemic has shown – disrupted national borders.