

SOURCE: *Daenell, Ernst. "The Policy of the German Hanseatic League Respecting the Mercantile Marine."* *The American Historical Review* 15 (October 1909). 47-53.

THE POLICY OF THE GERMAN HANSEATIC LEAGUE RESPECTING THE MERCANTILE MARINE¹

From the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries the north German towns in the long zone from Holland to Finland possessed the maritime government of the Baltic and the North Sea. They suppressed the formerly important navigation of the Scandinavians, pushed the old Russian sea-trade out of the Baltic and kept that of the Frisians, Dutch, and English within narrow limits during the same time, especially in the Baltic, the traffic of which they tried even to monopolize. They gained great privileges in England, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Russia, and these privileges formed the foundations of their position as the controlling agents of commerce and traffic in northern Europe. All the north German merchants and towns were interested in maintaining this position and united thereby into a close confederation. It was first in their factories abroad that the merchants of the different German towns formed a union as to commercial policy against the foreign country. It was this association which then exerted a reactive influence on their own towns, inasmuch as during the fourteenth century it effected a sort of confederation of the north German towns themselves for the purpose of carrying out a common commercial and maritime policy abroad and for the common protection and maintenance of the commercial and maritime predominance already gained. This German Hanseatic League, a quite singular product of medieval history, comprehended in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries some seventy towns, including some that are within the present limits of the Netherlands and of Russia. For centuries it supplied the dismembered German Empire with a sea-power and gave it commercial predominance on the seas that wash the German coasts. The leading town of the confederation was Lubeck, a town which still surpasses almost all German towns in the number of its imposing public and private buildings, and in medieval times far outrivaled any other north German town in

¹ Paper read by Professor Ernst Daenell of the University of Kiel, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Richmond, December 30, 1908. The author has made a more elaborate statement of the same matter in his work entitled *Die Blütezeit der Deutschen Hanse* (Berlin, two volumes, 1906), II. 334-389.

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the extent and variety of its trade and navigation. Therefore Lubeck was best able to govern a society composed of so many members having so many different individual interests.

The efficacious protection of Hanseatic interests required an organization of the confederation, a constitution. And indeed a kind of constitution was not wanting, but it remained imperfect to a high degree because it was always dependent upon the good-will of every one of the members. But in spite of defective harmony and disobedience and internal strife this constitution rendered good service in the main during the flourishing period of the League. It gave the League a useful basis and kept alive the feeling of community among its members, and it rendered possible the formation and the carrying into effect of general principles as to the most important questions of trade and navigation. These policies had their origin in the same monopolistic spirit as the similar policies of the medieval and post-medieval commercial and sea powers. They were intended to check the rise of the sea-power and commerce of the rivals of the League and to assist the Hanseatic people in outstripping foreigners more effectively by means of general legislation. Among these means, however, the statutes relating to the navigation policy played the principal part because of the fact that by far the greater part of the Hanseatic commerce was by sea. Thus the protection and promotion of navigation was of the greatest importance and a preliminary condition to the carrying out and increase of the Hanseatic commerce.

The comparatively huge development of the Hanseatic sea-trade would have been impossible without a splendid Hanseatic merchant marine. Carrying trade for others and ship-building had to exist in the Hanse towns in order to give the Hanseatic sea-trade the necessary independence and liberty. The Hanseatic merchant marine was thus of the most important assistance to Hanseatic commerce. And therefore it cannot be wondered at, that the League itself and its single members took a special care to secure and increase their shipping at any cost, to regulate its relation to commerce, and to prevent foreign competition.

All Hanse towns, which claimed to be seaports, probably had a more or less lively ship-building industry and flourishing manufactures connected with it. Many names of old streets and localities in the German coast towns to-day remind us of the old occupations, as for instance "Ankerschmiedegasse", where anchors, "Reppschägerstasse" and "Reeperbahn", where ropes, were made, "Lastadie", the place of the wharfs, the single parts of which

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were generally leased by the town council to the single ship-builders, furthermore the "Brakbank", where the ships were hauled and repaired, and so on. In contrast to the conditions existing to-day ship-building and everything connected with it flourished much more on the German Baltic shore than on the North Sea. The necessary raw materials, timber, and other products of forestry, such as tar and pitch from the neighboring large woods, iron from Sweden, copper from Hungary, and so on, could be obtained considerably cheaper and more easily in the Baltic towns, for geographical reasons. It therefore not infrequently happened that the carrying traders of the North Sea and of the non-Hanseatic towns in the further west tried to supply their need of ships by purchasing them in the Hanseatic Baltic towns.

The character of the then existing harbors from the Atlantic shores up to Russia did not encourage either the traffic or the building of the greater ships. The harbors were shallow, even the most important and frequented ones being on an average not more than seven to twelve feet deep, and in spite of all attempts adequate engineering facilities were not discovered to remedy this defect and to prevent the frequent washing in of sand. The consequence was that heavily loaded ships were often compelled to lighten themselves by discharging a portion of their freight into boats, conditions, which wasted time and money. A further consequence was that, from the fifteenth century on, efforts were made to adapt the size of the ships to the existing conditions of the harbors, that is to say, orders were published according to which no ships of more than a hundred *last*, that is about 200 to 250 modern tons, and of more than twelve feet draught, should be built. This gives an idea of the average size of Hanseatic vessels. They were, like medieval ships in general, very small according to our conceptions. Their principal types were the *Kogge* and the *Holk*, both broad and heavy vessels with one to three masts and with castle-like structures upon the prow and the stern. These like the top served military purposes; for warships as such were generally unknown. And every ship was always provided with sufficient weapons and ammunition as a defense against the piracy ceaselessly practiced along the coasts. In 1447 the Hanse required all its ships to be armed, and formulated fixed rules for the military equipment and the number of mariners. A ship of a hundred *last* had to carry weapons for twenty men, greater ones more, smaller ones fewer. And in order to secure its sea-traffic the Hanse proceeded further. From the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the Hanse had abandoned its former plan of

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suppressing piracy by special military expeditions, the so-called "Friedeschiffe", it became more and more common for ships sailing in the same direction to unite in fleets, which were not seldom accompanied by convoying ships armed especially well. The Hanse supported this development by prescriptions, intended to regulate the sailing in fleets, and to compel them to remain united.

In spite of the small size of the ships it is a fact that most of the Hanseatic ships were not built by single persons, but by a number of persons on shares. The average amount of these shares varied greatly. Shares of 1/32, even of 1/64, occur. Shares in ships were used by the whole Hanseatic people, the upper as well as the lower classes, as a very favorite investment, which, however, was as risky as it was profitable; for marine insurances was then unknown. In consequence of this practice the whole population of the towns was especially interested in all questions of sea traffic and of the maintenance of as large a merchant marine as possible.

The Hanse also took an intense interest in the other most essential factor, that is, the crew of the ships. The demand that the Hanseatic ships be manned with natives was never raised. But certainly the employment of foreign mariners on Hanseatic ships was entirely exceptional. The Hanse, however, made it a special object of its care to regulate the relation between the captain and his crew by minute rules concerning the duties and rights of both parties. By other rules the Hanse secured the correct execution of the freight contracts entered into by the captains, the time of unloading the goods, certain freight claims of the captains, and so on.

Medieval navigation much more than that of the present was exposed to dangers of every kind. And from early time the Hanse towns considered it one of their principal tasks to procure as much security as possible for their shipping. Lighthouses had been constructed from the beginning of the thirteenth century at the most important points of the Hanseatic routes. The channels between the sea and the harbors were marked by buoys and other objects. Pilotage developed as a profession long before the Hanse, in 1447, made the use of pilots compulsory for its ships in entering and leaving harbors. In 1448 Flanders published a number of rules which put the pilotage under governmental control. Marine charts were still unknown, but the compass was in use. And from the fourteenth century, in the so-called "Seebuch", the shipper possessed a work which informed him of tides, channels, harbors, location of the lighthouses and so on, from Russia down to Spain. The "Seebuch" did not originate all at one time but developed

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gradually. The work may have had its origin in the old harbors of the coast of western France and was then worked over and enlarged in Flanders, the real centre of the medieval traffic of Europe. It shows some Hanseatic influences, especially with regard to the North Sea and Baltic coasts. The origin of the book was therefore entirely similar to that of the contemporary Hanseatic marine law.

By means of a large number of regulations the Hanse aimed at protecting the shipping of its people against the severities of the season and against losses; such orders as for instance the suspension of navigation during the winter months, that is to say, from November 11 to February 2, a suspension which the Hanse introduced about the end of the fourteenth century, after the model of older corresponding regulations and customs of its most important single members; or orders intended to induce the Hanseatic ship-builders to construct seaworthy ships; or to prevent ships from being overloaded by the establishment of a distinct draught line such as existed for Venetian vessels by government order. Add to these a great quantity of orders, which required that the captains and their crews assist imperiled or wrecked ships, and other orders, which concerned jettison, plundering of ships by pirates, and the right of salvage. Most of these were not older than the fifteenth century.

Furthermore it is clear that the decades after 1350 the Hanse after having definitely formed its great union also developed distinct politico-economic policies with reference to the general merchant marine in northern Europe. These policies of course were animated by the same monopolistic spirit that determined the similar policies of other medieval and post-medieval sea-powers. They aimed at maintaining the conditions which had been secured about the middle of the fourteenth century, that is to say, the total or at least very thorough exclusion of non-Hanseatic shipping from the North Sea and the Baltic by means of general legislation against foreigners to the advantage of Hanseatic merchant marine. The non-Hanseatic peoples, especially the Dutch and Flemings, were compelled to agree to the same suspension of shipping in the winter within the Hanseatic districts which the Hanse itself practices. During the fifteenth century the Hanse made great endeavors to gain the consent of its members to a general interdiction of selling Hanseatic ships to foreigners, of constructing ships upon Hanseatic wharfs for the benefit of foreigners, and of allowing foreigners to participate in the Hanseatic carrying trade. But these attempts met

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with only partial success, especially in Danzig and the Prussian towns.

These various plans of the Hanse to oppress foreign shipping on its own account and not because of the trade connected with it were supplemented by those intended to do away with shipping in foreign bottoms by Hanseatic merchants. The former plans aimed at opposing as much as possible the increase of the foreign merchant marine, the latter at preventing the foreign carrying trade from making a profit out of Hanseatic commerce and at compelling the Hanseatic people to use Hanseatic ships exclusively, that is to say, the Hanse tried to maintain the conditions which had existed about 1350.

After the beginning of the fifteenth century the Hanse began its attack upon the increasing shipping of Hanseatic goods in foreign bottoms, a practice which promoted the encroachment of foreign shipping upon the North Sea and the Baltic and the Hanse towns, and in addition to this also attracted foreign commerce thither very largely. The Flemings and especially the Dutch had to suffer from this policy. But it met with opposition in the eastern as well as in the western groups of the Hanse towns. They wished to maintain a greater liberty of commerce, for by the elimination of foreigners they were threatened with becoming totally dependent on the carrying trade of the central group of the Hanse, the so-called Wendish towns, with Lubeck at their head, which represented the Hanseatic policy in its broadest sense. In spite of this, these central towns did not falter in their policy. The great meeting of the Hanse towns in 1470 tried to carry it out more fully by controlling the Hanseatic traffic in staples between the Baltic and Bruges by fixed regulations, which bound it to go via Lubeck and Hamburg, and by the ships, which both of these towns had to keep ready for this purpose. On the other hand, the employing of the ships of the Dutch, the most dangerous maritime competitors of the Hanse from the fifteenth century, was forbidden with special emphasis. But in spite of these measures the Hanse was not successful in preventing the frequent disobedience of its members to those orders.

The general prohibitions, which the Hanse put into effect somewhat tardily and hesitatingly, undoubtedly answered their purpose to a certain degree. They assisted in obstructing the traffic of foreigners in the trade district of the Hanse by checking the expansion of their share in Hanseatic freight business. Thus they were of advantage also to the carrying trade of the Hanse and might have offered a compensation also to the Hanseatic ship-building industry

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for the prohibition to sell ships to foreigners. Thus the mercantile marine policy of the Hanse toward foreigners consisted in the demand for suspending navigation during the winter months, in suppressing the participation of the capital of foreigners in the Hanseatic carrying trade, and in forbidding ship-building in Hanse towns for the benefit of foreigners, the sale of Hanseatic ships to them, and the shipping of Hanseatic goods in foreign bottoms.

If we state a general judgment, we may say that the various policies adopted by the Hanse in connection with the regulation of the merchant marine resulted in great and numerous advantages. It was successful in promoting and securing by all possible means the presence of its ships on the seas and in foreign countries. It greatly improved the conditions of navigation by extending its care to the ship itself, to the crew, and to many other matters of a technical kind. The Hanse made effective efforts to prevent its merchant marine from being damaged by foreign competition, by means of a great and well constructed system of regulations, supporting one another. All this was possible so long as the Hanse was a power, economically and politically superior and courted by the surrounding powers, which were rivals of one another. The consequence of the administration and legislation of the Hanse was, that toward the close of the Middle Ages the various questions relating to the merchant marine were invariably regulated so as to be uniform for the whole Hanseatic trade district of the North Sea and the Baltic. This system was a substitute for the maritime laws, which the German Empire lacked. It was intended to give to the whole of the north German towns and merchants that inward stability, and to assure them of those economic advantages, which the legislation of foreign countries then endeavored to offer their own subjects. And, in the main, this system served very well for centuries, until in the sixteenth century the Hanse itself met with destruction at the hands of its rivals, whom it had been able to keep down for one of two centuries in its traffic districts by means of its system of regulating the merchant marine.

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