The Overseas World—and Hamburg: On the Postwar Recreation of Locality in a German Port City

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Abstract

Closely reading the Overseas Review—a journal founded in the German port city of Hamburg in 1949—this article examines the contemporary concept of “overseas” and studies how a local tradition drawing on the city’s overseas relations was recreated in the context of the postwar era. Whereas this tradition perceived the overseas world as being in a state of fundamental change, it emphasized Hamburg’s traditional role as a “bridge” to this world. The historicity of the link between the overseas world and the city of Hamburg became particularly tangible through the introduction of the Overseas Day in 1951 to celebrate the “harbor’s birthday.” Appealing to a tradition of turning overseas could provide the basis for a cosmopolitan worldview, while this tradition was simultaneously also combined with a pioneering and even expansionist outlook.

Keywords: Postwar Germany, Port Cities, Hamburg, World Perception, Locality, Memory Culture
Introduction

This article is based on the idea that locality can be applied not only as a spatial category to study processes on a small scale but also as a useful term to study the processes of making a place, of positioning it in space and time, and of forming place-related traditions. It shares the theoretical assumption that locality can be understood as a result of an active differentiation of place from space\(^1\) —a process of setting the local into various relations.\(^2\)

In comparison to other spatial or political units, locality has made a remarkable ascent over the last 20 years, in particular as a counter term to globality. However, this study focuses on a historical setting that is rarely studied in this context: the German city of Hamburg in the late 1940s and 1950s. It will demonstrate how a world —understood as the “overseas world”— could serve as a reference frame to recreate a notion of locality.

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For the city of Hamburg, which suffered large-scale destruction during World War 2, the late 1940s and 1950s was a time of reconstruction in a physical sense, a time of (re-)establishing political institutions and economic ties. As a port city, it attached great importance to any attempts to reconnect the maritime trading networks that had been almost fully disrupted during the Nazi era. The efforts to reconstruct the city were accompanied by discussions and political moves to reposition Hamburg in the world. In light of the recent Nazi era and World War 2, the prevailing notion of the time was to overcome the “catastrophe” as quickly as possible and to link up with “good” traditions from the past. Eventually, these traditions were even construed as continuities to the present day that had survived the Nazi era. But which traditions could be relied upon?


Against this background, the present article asks how the world was perceived from Hamburg’s perspective in the postwar era, and what processes of recreating a local tradition of connecting up with the world could be observed. Methodologically, this article proceeds by examining a journal, the Übersee-Rundschau [Overseas Review], founded in the city of Hamburg in 1949. What makes the textual as well as the visual inventory of this journal an excellent source for studying the questions posed here is the fact that the journal published not only texts and illustrations produced by journalists. It also assembled articles written by a wide range of businessmen, politicians, and also academics who were situated mainly in Hamburg and also in Bremen, Germany’s second biggest port city. The main purpose of the Übersee-Rundschau, coedited by a number of business associations, was to promote Germany’s, and in particular Hamburg’s and Bremen’s foreign trade relations. At the same time, it became a platform for discussing West Germany’s position in the world along with the role of its port cities, as well as a medium to represent Hamburg’s and Bremen’s traditions as maritime cities closely connected with the overseas world.

The Übersee-Rundschau

Although the language of the journal was German, a considerable number of articles appeared in English, Spanish, and other languages. Right from the beginning, the journal was also marketed under the English title Overseas Review and the French title *Revue d’outre-mer*.

![A locomotive being loaded for export in Hamburg harbor. Übersee-Rundschau, front page, 1954.](image)

The launching of a business journal only a couple of years after World War 2 in a city vastly destroyed during the war requires further explanation. To understand its emergence, we first have to bear in mind the postwar boom in overseas trade from a Western European perspective along with the great efforts by the British authorities to physically reconstruct the port of Hamburg, situated as it was in the British Northwest German occupation zone. More generally, we have to take into

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rational consideration that Western Germany benefited economically from its new geopolitical border position in the emerging Cold War. The Western Allies wished to integrate Western Germany economically and politically into the western hemisphere. This formed the basis for the British authorities’ ambitious plan to rebuild Hamburg’s port in only a few years.6 The reconstruction of Hamburg’s seaport advanced impressively from 1948 onward with the British gradually handing back authority for the port to the Germans.7

Against the background of the revival of Hamburg’s seafaring trade, the trading companies that had reestablished themselves in Hamburg had a growing need for information on trade conditions, for political analyses, and for a platform to express their common interests. All these needs were met by the Overseas Review. The Review was coedited by business associations situated in both Hamburg and Bremen: the East Asian, the Ibero-American, the African, and the Near and Middle East Associations.8 Accordingly, the Overseas Review had a


7) See Engel and Tode, *Hafen,* 106. It should be mentioned that the Overseas Review hardly ever mentioned the central role of the British in reconstructing Hamburg’s seaport. The only exception I could find is Friedrich Mühlradt, 1950. “Hamburgs Hafen. Der technische Wiederaufbau des Hamburger Hafens seit 1945,” *Übersee-Rundschau* 2,3, VI–VII.

strong focus on Asia, Latin America, and Africa.9

These business associations were private societies founded from 1900 onward mainly by merchants situated in Hamburg and Bremen. During the course of the 1950s, they underwent major changes with membership spreading to more and more businessmen and companies from other West German regions. Therefore, the lobbying work of these associations had to pay increasing attention to other branches and to other parts of Germany. This process is also reflected in the Overseas Review, when, during the course of the 1950s, we find more presentations of West German companies and industrial areas beyond Hamburg or Bremen.10 From a journal addressing and representing particularly Hamburg’s and Bremen’s businessmen and the two cities at the end of the 1940s and in the early 1950s, by the end of the decade, the Overseas Review had become a business magazine oriented toward West Germany as a whole and more strongly oriented toward foreign readers interested in Germany.

In the time period under consideration here, the main idea of the business associations was to bring together business and

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9) North America was excluded because of its “special character,” as the first issue, “Zum Geleit,” explained, Übersee-Rundschau 1,1 (1949): 1.
10) An increasing space was also devoted to the topic of German foreign schools.
politics, and also culture and science. Accordingly, the journal provided its readers with not only business news and political comments but also reports on cultural topics as well as attempts to popularize academic research. The journal appeared once a month; for some time in the 1950s, even every two weeks. Unfortunately, no information is available on the number of copies published, but the widespread availability of the journal in libraries and the increasing amount of lavish advertising suggests that its circulation must have been good.

The World—Reviewed Locally

To better understand how the editors and the authors of the Overseas Review made sense of the world and put Hamburg into relation to it, it is worth studying how the journal used the concept of “overseas”—its idea, visualizations, and associations. Overseas, logically, means every land that lies beyond the sea. Speaking of overseas implies a certain standpoint—otherwise every landmass in the world, including the speaker’s own continent, would be overseas. However, this was certainly not the idea reflected in the Overseas Review. The standpoint of the journal was always Germany and/or the port cities of Hamburg and Bremen. From the perspective of the long-distance trading companies based in Hamburg and Bremen that dominated the business associations responsible for editing the journal,
“overseas” was the fitting term to address their common area of interest: all countries “over the sea” with which it was possible to trade.

But reading the Overseas Review, it becomes obvious that overseas represented more than this and assembled rather different imaginaries: First of all, overseas was associated with seafaring. A number of articles in the Review adopted overseas in their title when they were dedicated to the history of seafaring, to daring expeditions, or to adventurous entrepreneurship. These articles often focused on Hamburg or Bremen and had a nostalgic air; some of them explicitly connecting past and present in the sense of continuity by, for example, paying equal homage to both past and present adventurous Hamburg businessmen. Additionally, overseas seems to have also called up the image of vast spaces and possibilities that were lost at present. Two articles independently chose the title: “When the world was still large and broad.”

Second, overseas was associated with “far away” and evoked exotic imaginaries. It is quite interesting to observe that the Overseas Review (re-)produced a range of exotic and orientalist imaginaries while, at the same time, its editors expressed the wish to provide readers with a realistic overview of the

Several reports and visualizations made sense of the contemporary overseas world by describing or depicting a radical juxtaposition of tradition and modernity that was understood as representing a pivot of great historic change between the past and the future.

Figures 2–4 present visual examples of highly stereotyped orientalist and partly even sexualized representations of Africa, the Orient, and East Asia within the Overseas Review. Looking at them carefully, one can observe elements of modernity being contrasted with traditional elements. Figure 3, for example, arranges motor trucks next to camels; Figure 4 depicts industrial installations in the background of a traditionally clothed rice farmer. These visualizations stand side by side with photographic reports on modern life in the overseas world,

exemplified in Figures 5 and 6 addressing “new architecture in East Asia” and a modern catering service supplying “fresh noodles for Tokyo’s bureaus.”

Fig. 5-6: “New Architecture in East Asia”; “Fresh noodles for Tokyo’s bureaus. Tokyo’s famed Soba-Men,” Übersee-Rundschau 1956; Übersee-Rundschau, 1953.

Third, overseas also evoked associations with expansionism, imperialism, and Germany’s colonial past. When this link was taken up in the Review, we can observe a surprising heterogeneity of notions extending from one article claiming that Germany had no colonial or imperial past at all,14 over colonial nostalgia,15 to gently critical approaches to colonialism. Speaking of the present and the future, most authors agreed that the

imperial past was a shared European past, and that present tasks arising from this shared responsibility—particularly in Africa—should therefore include Germany. The shared opinion in this context was that Germany should again play an active role in the overseas world.

The fourth notion of overseas to be observed here is that some commentators used the term to simply underline the connectedness with the foreign world. Instead of distance, they underline closeness. One author stressed that today’s world is an entangled world and that therefore Germany should not stand isolated. Another author expressed this in the formula: “land separates, water connects”. This also points to the fact that within the overseas perspective, it became particularly possible to exclude regions with which West Germany had heavily strained relations or countries with which relations had been cut off during the course of the Cold War such as the Soviet Union.


These were not regarded as part of the overseas world within the Overseas Review.

Beneath the level of overseas, the world of the Overseas Review was separated into different world areas. These areas were predetermined locally in the sense that they were equated with the composition of the Hamburg and Bremen business associations: the East Asian, the Ibero-American, the African, and the Near and Middle East Associations. Hence, East Asia in the Overseas Review, for example, consisted of all countries from India eastward.

Fig. 7: Overseas Review: Coverage of world areas, 1949–1960 (articles without book reviews, total: 933 articles).
If we look at the ratio of the different world areas covered by all main articles in the Overseas Review from 1949 to 1960, we can see that coverage was rather similar for Africa, Latin America, and East Asia.

A Localized Overseas

The most overt and frequent occasion to make Hamburg a topic in the Overseas Review was the Overseas Day [Übersee-Tag] celebrated annually from 1951 onward.

This festival was invented by the Overseas Club whose membership had a broad overlap with the business associations. The idea behind the Overseas Day was to celebrate the mediaeval founding of Hamburg’s harbor by a charter said to
have been granted to the city by the German Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa in 1189.\textsuperscript{20} The introduction of the Overseas Day in 1951 to celebrate the harbor’s birthday indicates a desire to turn to history, to link up with a local tradition of seafaring dating back to mediaeval times and to create a sense of belonging with Hamburg’s seaport. Reading the speeches on the occasion of the first Overseas Day, printed in the Review, it becomes clear that turning to Hamburg’s older history was a way of leaving the more recent “dark years” behind—for which “catastrophe” was the dominant term.\textsuperscript{21} The search for traditions to follow in the present was particularly successful in the case of Hamburg’s historic overseas relations. However, these relations were used to prove quite different things: they could prove that Hamburg and Germany—and here the local and national could easily intersect—had friends in the world, that Hamburg used to be a cosmopolitan city with overseas contacts based on reciprocity,\textsuperscript{22} or that Hamburgers had always been pioneers of expansion and should be proud of it,\textsuperscript{23} or, as one author put it, that Hamburg was simply indestructible—by neither the Normans in the 9th century nor the bombs of July

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\textsuperscript{20} In the 1970s, the Overseas Day became a mass event in Hamburg and was renamed “Harbor’s Birthday.”


\textsuperscript{23} See Übersee-Rundschau 2,2 (1950), front page.
A common phrase when speaking of Hamburg in the Overseas Review was that of a “gate to the world” [Tor zur Welt]. This is visualized in Figure 8 announcing the Overseas Day. It adopts Hamburg’s coat of arms depicting a castle, but metaphorically opens the closed gates toward the world. The slogan “Hamburg—gate to the world” had indeed a longer history dating back to the time of World War 1. It became very popular around 1930, in the time of the Great Depression, and was broadly used in the early tourism marketing of the city.25 Even more frequently than the figure of a gate in the Overseas Review, we find the figure of Hamburg as a bridge to the world, for example, as a bridge from home to friends of Germany in the overseas world,26 or as a “world bridge from Central Europe to overseas” in the sense of a task deriving from Hamburg’s geographical position to connect a hinterland, its capability, and its tradition.27

But in the eyes of the commentators and authors of the Overseas Review, Hamburg should not only link up with its

historical inheritance of trading and acting overseas. The actuality of Hamburg’s cultural values should be discussed just as equally, and a local cosmopolitan tradition should be projected onto the past. In this sense, for example, the past and present focus of Hamburg’s university toward the world was emphasized along with its present openness toward foreign students. One author interpreted Hamburg’s whole cultural scene as derived from a cosmopolitan notion extending from classical music over theater, literature, and publishing to fine arts and the film industry. Next to this, we find articles celebrating a pioneering, adventurous, and even expansionist spirit in Hamburg’s history.

This makes it clear that not only Hamburg’s location in the world was being repositioned, but that by interpreting Hamburg’s past and present as a continuity in cosmopolitism or as a home of a pioneering and expansionist ambition, an attempt was being made to define a specific locality. One might further argue that, at the same time, the overseas world was being localized and integrated into this specific locality. This is exemplified in Figure 10 depicting a localist representation of the coffee import trade and the coffee exchange “domiciled” in Hamburg.

31) See above, Footnotes 15–17.
Conclusion

Relocating the city of Hamburg only a few years after World War 2 had both a spatial and a temporal dimension. Hamburg’s, as well as West Germany's, new position in the world had to be balanced, and in the present situation, a need was felt to link up with traditions that referred back to the time before the Nazi era and World War 2. Like the nation, locality, too, had to be recreated.

In the case of the port city of Hamburg, this article has shown the significant role of the concept of “overseas” in recreating a Hamburg-specific local tradition. The Overseas Review, edited by a number of business associations situated in the cities of Hamburg and Bremen, did not just provide its readers with practical knowledge on different world regions; it also proved to
be a medium for appealing to and representing Hamburg’s traditional role as a “bridge” to the overseas world. Whereas it was the express aim of the journal’s editors to revitalize economic ties and to reestablish relations to faraway “friends of Germany,” representing Hamburg’s connectivity with the overseas world simultaneously created a specific sense of locality anchoring it in the city’s history. This also applied to the introduction of the Overseas Day in 1951 to celebrate the “birthday” of Hamburg’s seaport charter in medieval times. But, examining the Overseas Review also reveals that the local was not considered in opposition to the national. On the contrary, there was a deliberate attempt to closely combine the two. During the course of this article, we can also observe that “overseas” evoked different associations, oscillating between orientalist, traditionalist, and modernist imaginaries. The local tradition of “turning overseas” was also understood in different ways: Whereas some emphasized a cosmopolitan notion deriving from this heritage, others openly celebrated its pioneering and even expansionist spirit.
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