

Book panel: Baltic hospitality from the middle ages to the twentieth century: Receiving strangers in Northeastern Europe

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This panel offers a critical discussion of the edited volume "Baltic hospitality from the middle ages to the twentieth century: Receiving strangers in Northeastern Europe", edited by Sari Nauman, Wojtek Jezierski, Christina Reimann, Leif Runefelt, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Hospitality towards guests, welcoming or rejection of strangers and migrants are at the heart of present public debates in many countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. The different stances taken towards these guests – presented varyingly as threats and matters of public safety, or as recipients of help and relief – taps into larger discussions about xenophobia or philanthropic attitudes towards strangers.

In academia, political philosophers, anthropologists, students of literature and religion have long explored hospitality as the bedrock of a European cultural legacy and debated its political and ethical potential. However, both recurring public claims of contemporary 'migrant crises' being unprecedented and the theoretical yet historically ungrounded ensuing discussions would be better served if confronted with the legacy of (in)hospitality in Northern Europe and with how such crises were actually resolved in the past.

The Baltic region and its history of being a connective space of cosmopolitan encounters and clashes of cultures during the past millennium, offers a unique opportunity to isolate, investigate, and exemplify these topics. The knowledge of the cultural mechanisms of (in)hospitality in different historical contexts will cast new light on the current predicaments of migration and enable comparison between past and present experiences of reception or rejection of strangers. In order to bridge the divide between the past and present, nationally devised concepts of refugee, migrant, and displaced person, this volume integrates these categories into a larger conceptual frame.

The volume analyses why and under what circumstances strangers (migrants, war refugees, missionaries, and others) were portrayed as threats to local populations or objects of their charity. We ask how these images guided the practical local – political, administrative and religious – responses of host communities in the Baltic Sea region, c. 1000-1900.

By applying our theoretical and methodological premises in the well-limited context of the Baltic Sea region – seen as a uniquely multi-layered space of intercultural encounter and conflict in European history, a sui generis Mediterranean of the North – the significance and implications of this project are threefold.

Firstly, the volume will provide historical nuance and bring back past understandings of hospitality to present day's habitually high-flown claims about its universal and ethical potential, and about its inherently beneficial character promoted by other disciplines.

Secondly, the rigorous study of these research problems in concrete cases make the examples from the Eastern European and Baltic regions more accessible to and comparable with other strands in migration studies.

Finally, a longitudinal view on hospitality around the Baltic Sea will offer a sobering historical perspective for the current debates about the 'migrant crises' in the region.

Upon acceptance, we will further invite a hospitality practitioner to join the panel as a discussant.