





### **Felicitas Söhner**

[Institute for the History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine,  
Centre for Health and Society, Medical Faculty, Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4391-0090>


### **Thorsten Halling**

[Institute for the History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine,  
Centre for Health and Society, Medical Faculty, Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1743-1611>

### **Nils Hansson**

[Institute for the History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine,  
Centre for Health and Society, Medical Faculty, Heinrich-Heine-University, Düsseldorf]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0167-4763>

## **Scientific exchange in the Baltic Sea region during the Cold War – an ongoing transnational Oral History Project**

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.331

Submitted on: 26 July 2022

Accepted on: 18 July 2023

Published on: 3 November 2023

The work is original and has not been published anywhere before.



### **Abstract**

Science communication, especially science diplomacy, is seen as a means to remain in the conversation in times of political crisis, including the Cold War era. In this paper, drawing on experiences from an ongoing oral history project within the 'Bridging the Baltic' network, which is interested in knowledge transfer during the Cold War and afterwards in northern Europe, we look at pitfalls of international interview projects in medicine, e.g. the influence of the chosen language in international interview projects.

### **Keywords**

Baltic Sea region, European history, history of science, Cold War, narratives, methodology, oral history



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As a traditional interaction zone between Russian and Northern European cultural circles, the Baltic Sea region was an important arena for scientific exchange during the Cold War. There are several projects that deal with international scientific or economic exchange with different focal points: the project *Connecting Three Worlds*<sup>2</sup> investigates socialist networks in the field of public health and in technical assistance programmes in the health sector in the post-war era; the project *Socialist Medicine: An Alternative Global Health History*<sup>3</sup> examines the role of the socialist world in global health and its networks; and *ExpertTurn*<sup>4</sup> analyses the character of governance and the construction of health and normalcy through human-science expertise during state socialism in East-Central Europe. In these projects, the sources include biographical interviews. Also based on oral history is the project *Czechoslovak-Polish Scholarly Entanglements in the Cold War Between High Politics and Individual Strategies*.<sup>5</sup> This project concentrates on mathematics and related disciplines – such as applied mathematics, science of science, astronomy and geology – and on economics and sociology from both countries and the way their work resulted in transborder cooperation.

Research into Cold War history has focused on the relationship between policy-making and knowledge production. Referred to as ‘Cold War social science,’ this topic has been extensively examined, shifting the historiographical focus towards the cultural and intellectual aspects of the post-war era.<sup>6</sup> There are numerous contributions discussing the influence of the Cold War context on fields such as political science, psychology and military-funded social scientific research.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, transnational and comparative research on East-West interactions, knowledge

- 1 This short contribution draws attention to an ongoing oral history project and at the same time reflects the suggestions the authors received in discussions with the participants of the conference *Historia mówiona pogranicza (Oral History of the Borderlands)*, Wrocław, Poland, 7–8 June 2022, <https://www.zajezdnia.org/en/aktualnosci-artykul/osrodek-pamiec-i-przyszlosc-zaprasza-do-udzialu-w-konferencji-naukowej> (accessed: 18.07.2022).
- 2 <https://connecting3worlds.org> (accessed: 06.06.2023).
- 3 <https://socialistmedicineblog.wordpress.com/about/> (06.06.2023).
- 4 <https://expertturn.fss.muni.cz/about> (06.06.2023).
- 5 <https://projekty.ncn.gov.pl/opisy/502194-en.pdf> (06.06.2023).
- 6 M. Solovey, H. Cravens (eds.), *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature*, New York 2012; F.J. Gavin, M.A. Lawrence (eds.), *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, Oxford 2014; D.C. Engerman, *Social Science in the Cold War, ‘Isis,’* vol. 101, 2010, pp. 393–400.
- 7 D.C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy. The Rise and Fall of American Soviet Experts*, Oxford 2009; R. Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy. Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex*, Princeton 2001.

exchanges and research collaborations holds promise and has in recent years ago gained attention.<sup>8</sup>

The transnational oral history project presented here is part of the network 'Bridging the Baltic.' Supported by the German Research Foundation and the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health, the network brings together researchers who currently work on aspects of medical history in the Baltic Sea region to illuminate currents of ideas and areas of cooperation and conflict.<sup>9</sup> The main theme of the network is about how the circulation of knowledge in medicine played out during the Cold War, about how science exchange in medicine worked behind the Iron Curtain.

With participants from all corners of the Baltic Sea area, we have so far staged six symposia: Lund 2014, Düsseldorf 2019, online (due to Covid-19) 2020, Riga 2021, Odense 2022 and most recently Lund 2023. These meetings have been characterised by interdisciplinarity with speakers from different fields, such as historians, physicians, philosophers, ethnologists and scholars of literature studies. The network has so far published several volumes.<sup>10</sup>

The focus of this ongoing oral history project is the question of how the interviewees situate themselves and their institution in the national and international research context (with a special focus on the Baltic Sea region). Here, we provide an interim report on the progress of the project. We have conducted and continue to conduct interviews with medical professionals in the Baltic Sea region. We ask them about their perceptions and experiences of scientific exchange during the Cold War: What role did scientific exchange in the Baltic Sea region actually play in research practice and in everyday clinical practice? We aim to find answers to the following sub-questions: Did European/international collaboration change after 1990, including among the (former) Iron Curtain states? If so, how did it change over time? Which factors (barriers and drivers) influenced the scientific exchange? What kinds of expertise played a role in different fields and at different points of time? How has expertise become institutionalised in the countries involved?

8 J.K. Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism*, Stanford 2011; J. Andersson, E. Rindzeviciute (eds.), *The Struggle for the Long-Term in Transnational Science and Politics: Forging the Future*, London 2015.

9 <https://balticmedicine.wordpress.com/oral-history/> (accessed: 06.06.2023).

10 *Medizin im Ostseeraum: Deutsch-skandinavischer Wissenstransfer im Kalten Krieg*, 'Medizin-historisches Journal,' special issue, vol. 57, no. 2, 2022; *History of Medicine in the Baltic Sea region*, 'Acta medico-historica Rigensia,' special issue, vol. 14, 2021; N. Hansson, J. Wistrand (eds.), *Explorations in Medical History in the Baltic Sea region 1850–2015*, Rochester 2019.

We have documented the interviews as videos on our project homepage *Bridging the Baltic Network and Oral History. Insights into scientific exchange in medicine during the Cold War and beyond*.<sup>11</sup> The transnational analysis will then present a comparative examination of patterns of perception and staging. Initial results were recently published in the German journal 'Medizinhistorisches Journal'.<sup>12</sup>

In this contribution, we focus on three special methodological challenges within our project: (1) the compilation of a balanced and transnational sample of contemporary witnesses; (2) the interview language as an important influencing factor with non-native speakers; and (3) the interpretation of hegemonic narratives and the importance of gender aspects.

### **Methodological challenges: the sample**

As in many oral history projects, the central challenges in the sample described here were to identify relevant actors of scientific exchange in the Baltic Sea region during the Cold War and to establish contact with them. Our preliminary work on certain developments in medicine, for example in surgery, gynaecology, otorhinolaryngology and genetics in the Baltic Sea region,<sup>13</sup> and the resulting personal relationships enabled us to make contact with the first interview partners. After these first contacts, a so-called snowball effect can set in, so that further contacts can be established through the first intermediaries. In this phase, transparent, empathetic communication is essential to gain trust, arouse interest and counteract possible reasons for reticence and skepticism. In cross-border projects, communication can be influenced by existing or perceived cultural differences. For example, perceived

11 *Bridging the Baltic Network and Oral History. Insights into scientific exchange in medicine during the Cold War and beyond*, <https://balticmedicine.wordpress.com> (accessed: 18.07.2022); open access also available here <https://mediathek.hhu.de/playlist/1251> (accessed: 18.07.2022).

12 F. Söhner, T. Halling, N. Hansson, *Bridging the Baltic: Insights into Transfers of Knowledge in the Baltic Sea Region during the Cold War via Oral History*, 'Medizinhistorisches Journal,' vol. 57, no. 2, 2022, pp. 205–214.

13 N. Hansson, *Opportunities and challenges for scientific exchange in the Baltic Sea region: Lessons from the Baltic conferences on obstetrics and gynecology (1987–2001)*, 'Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand,' 23 May 2022, doi: 10.1111/aogs.14383; T. Halling, N. Hansson, *Akademien der Wissenschaften im Kalten Krieg: Forscherinnen und Forscher aus Schweden und der DDR zwischen Wissenschaftsaustausch und Wissenschaftsdiplomatie*, 'Medizinhistorisches Journal,' vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 182–204; F. Söhner, N. Hansson, *Placing women in Cytogenetics: Lore Zech and the chromosome banding technique*, 'Mol Cytogenet,' vol. 14, no. 1, 2021, pp. 40–44; N. Hansson, T. Halling, *Germanophilia or Germanophobia? Contacts between Scandinavia and Germany in the field of urology 1930–1960*, in D. Schultheiss, F. Moll (eds.), *Urology under the Swastika*, Davidsfonds 2017, pp. 212–219.

attitudes and stereotypes can arouse resentment.<sup>14</sup> Existing prejudices can also influence one's own perception and memory. For example, it became apparent that the assignment of actors to the periphery or centre within the scientific research network was depicted differently.<sup>15</sup>

Once contact has been successfully established, it is important to inform the witnesses in advance of the interview about the aims of the project, the main topics of the interview and the context in which the interview should and may be used. However, this procedure produces limitations and biases in the study, which must be reflected in the evaluation of the results.<sup>16</sup> For example, leading researchers in a subject area do not necessarily have to be identical with the key figures in scientific exchange in a regional study area. Above all, the snowball effect fosters a reduction to certain narratives.

So far, our sample consists of 14 experts from the field of medicine, especially from gynaecology, and six of them are women – all worked in the Baltic Sea region. When selecting respondents, we try to consider multiperspectivity (e.g. nationality, generation, academic position, gender), comparability (e.g. same disciplines) and practicability. Further interviews are planned, and the detailed analysis of the interviews is still pending.

Ideally, we try to shed light on as many facets of the respective institution as possible. We started the survey with retired professors, as they probably have the best overview of international collaborations during their time. They experienced these developments at different stages of their academic careers. It is much more difficult to find other of the medical professionals involved.

To provide a better comparability of the different narratives, we initially focused on surgical disciplines (e.g. gynaecology, otorhinolaryngology). We want to expand this focus gradually.

### **Methodological challenges: interview language**

A relevant point that should be clarified before the interviews begin is that of the language used. Thus, the question of understanding agreed upon, the choice of interview language can either correspond to the linguistic normality of the interviewees or deviate from it. For instance, emotional aspects could be presented differently;

14 A. Kordaß, *Who is living in the post? Perspektiven von Akademiker\*innen aus der DDR auf die deutsche Wiedervereinigung und Nachwendezeit*, 'Berliner Blätter,' vol. 85, 2022, pp. 49–60; W. Methling, *Aufgaben und Ergebnisse der Arbeit der Ehren-, Überleitungs- und Übernahme-kommissionen*, in M. Herms [et al.] (eds.), *Die politische Wende an der Universität Rostock 1989 bis 1992: Abbrüche, Umbrüche, Aufbrüche; Kolloquium zur Universitätsgeschichte*, Rostock 2015, pp. 26–35.

15 F. Söhner [et al.], *Bridging the Baltic*, p. 211.

16 F. Söhner, *Intercultural learning and biography research – an approach to the perception of the other*, 'Bildungsforschung,' vol. 1, 2022, pp. 1–15.

also misinterpretations can occur if the participants are limited in their ability to express themselves. Even if the international comparability of interviews seems easier with a chosen uniform language, the question of the agreed tool of language is therefore not insignificant. So, if one language is preferred, alternatives should be made possible in case of doubt. It should also be critically discussed in the analysis that understanding is bound to the respective language and professional culture.<sup>17</sup> Every oral history interview can be understood simultaneously as a communicative event, as a material object and as part of public memory. In this respect, the complex interweaving of subject-specific knowledge, individual remembering and linguistic knowledge should be reflected methodically in every case.<sup>18</sup>

So that the discussions can be easily compared and analysed across national borders, we decided the interviews should ideally be in English, but other languages are possible as well. This decision assumed that the common scientific language English was a central basis for scientific exchange in the Baltic Sea region. Independently of this, the question of the significance of the interview language was intensively discussed at the conference *Oral History of the Borderlands* within the framework of authenticity.<sup>19</sup>

### **Methodological challenges: hegemonic narratives**

It must also be considered that in expert interviews, especially elite interviews in the sciences, one is not only confronted with very self-confident but also rhetorically trained interview partners who often have a very precise idea of the course the conversation should take.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in order to establish comparability, our interviews will be conducted according to the established partially standardised, guideline-based interview. Guideline-based interviews are, on the one hand, sufficiently open to enable collection of new qualitative data and, on the other hand, sufficiently rule-governed and systematic to answer research questions in a comparative analysis.

In the interviews conducted so far, there are many narratives of so-called 'old white men.' However, they differ greatly from person to person: the ear-nose-throat-surgeon Lars Malm (Lund) emphasized that the scientific exchange between East and West had been of equal benefit to both sides: "I think that was

17 P. Berger, T. Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt 1980, p. 41.

18 J. Mlynář, *How is Oral History Possible? On Linguistically Universal and Topically Specific Knowledge*, 'The Oral History Review,' vol. 49, no. 1, 2022, pp. 116-132.

19 G.H. Mead, *Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt 1934/1998.

20 W. Harvey, *Strategies for conducting elite interviews*, 'Qualitative Research,' vol. 11, 2011, pp. 431-441.

valuable for both of us in Sweden and there in Germany, both in the West Germany and the East Germany.”<sup>21</sup> The Swedish gynaecologist Nils-Otto Sjöberg (Lund) described the cross-border scientific exchange more as “Western development aid.” He reports from a meeting in 1989 in Poland (Gdańsk): “We have brought with us from my department a well functioning but old type of ultrasound machine as a present to Poland.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, he reports on a meeting in Estonia in 1991: “When we prepared the meeting a year before, we saw they still use old things [...] So we brought a lot of material with us to them.”<sup>23</sup> Asked if the collaborations did change anything in the way he worked, Sjöberg stated: “Our own work did not change, but we think that we did something very good, that a lot of the Baltic doctors could come over to us, and be modern educated and some of them had actual stayed and made a career here in Sweden.”<sup>24</sup>

For comparison, here are two examples from the female elite in gynaecology. Here, too, the assessment of East–West relations varies. This time, however, because of their different origins. The interview partner Gunta Lazdane comes from Riga, while the interviewee Liselotte Mettler worked in Kiel. Lazdane remarked that

especially in obstetrics and gynaecology, there were mostly women and few men. And medicine was a female profession in the Soviet Union. I was always joking that most of the ministers and professors were men, but in principle the working staff were all women [...] It was no problem [...] as a woman, to become a [...] gynaecologist [...] but the competition was rather [hard], there were three, four people for one place.<sup>25</sup>

Mettler in particular also made clear the male dominance among full professors in gynaecology in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s:

I surely can tell [...] that [Lazdane] is right in her comments. In my time when I started in Kiel [...] well I had then three children, also with a whole career [...] it was not easy in the early years, but possible. [...] I was always happy to see so many women in the Baltic Sea exchange. There were three ladies, professors, coming from Estonia, Russia and Poland to do training with us [...] they become very well known professors. In the beginning, there were females from

21 HHU Mediathek, Bridging the Baltic, Interview with Lars Malm, 26 February 2022 (recorded by Nils Hansson), <https://mediathek.hhu.de/watch/0bce62cd-1075-4720-8507-914b6f2acc48> (accessed: 06.06.2023).

22 HHU Mediathek, Bridging the Baltic, Interview with Nils-Otto Sjöberg, 25 February 2022 (recorded by Nils Hansson), <https://mediathek.hhu.de/watch/15b0f5a0-7d1e-424b-9ae8-f12952dd8b5e> (accessed: 06.06.2023).

23 *Ibidem*.

24 *Ibidem*.

25 HHU Mediathek, Bridging the Baltic, Interview with Gunta Lazdane, 21 February 2022 (recorded by Nils Hansson), <https://mediathek.hhu.de/watch/13e5foe3-daba-4fc3-b6ab-cc29953532c1> (accessed: 06.06.2023).

Russia and India, but there were few females from the European countries. Now this is luckily changed. Today there is a good equal level and equal rights, what is important. I think, the beginning years in my medical career were difficult as a woman, but [...] it was ok. There was nothing to have cry about [...] but in higher positions we were not accepted for several years.<sup>26</sup>

It is becoming apparent that in our case the narratives are shaped more by the individual East-West experience than by gender. Such hegemonic narratives and competing communities of remembrance has to be taken in account. By triangulating the oral history approach, i.e. by including other sources such as lists of participants in conference reports,<sup>27</sup> such distortions can at least be reduced.<sup>28</sup>

### Outlook

Beyond the primary analysis, we are thus creating an oral history platform on the topic of medicine in the Baltic region during the Cold War. There, together with metadata, the full texts are to be made available for further research. A linkage with other European oral history projects with comparable questions is also conceivable.<sup>29</sup> One main question could be the influence of the chosen language in international interview projects.

In the long term, the aim could be to collect and archive interviews with professionals from all over Europe and beyond and to establish an interview database for European history of medicine during the Cold War. This would be valuable for projects such as the one described here or the project about scientific exchanges and activities of Czechoslovakia in Latin America during the years of socialism. The significant expenditure in terms of both personnel and financial resources on oral history projects could be compensated by a secondary use of the data.

26 HHU Mediathek, Bridging the Baltic, Interview with Liselotte Mettler, 21 February 2022 (recorded by Nils Hansson), <https://mediathek.hhu.de/watch/of4dc976-65bb-4ce5-bd7d-a21077385be9> (accessed: 06.06.2023).

27 E.g. K. Marsal (ed.), *Proceedings. First Baltic Conference on Obstetrics and Gynecology and 84<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Southern Swedish Gynaecological Society, 22–24 May 1987 Rostock-Warnemünde GDR*, Malmö 1987.

28 F. Söhner, *Oral History in Exile Research – Potential and Limitations of the narrative approach*, in B. Dogramaci [et al.] (ed.), *Urban Exile: Theories, Methods, Research Practices*, Munich 2022.

29 For example, A. Widell, *Videointervjuer från 2017*, <http://www.smhs.nu/videointervjuer/> (accessed: 18.07.2022).





## Bibliography

- Andersson J., Rindzeviciute E. (eds.), *The Struggle for the Long-Term in Transnational Science and Politics: Forging the Future*, London 2015.
- Berger P., Luckmann T., *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt 1980.
- Bockman J.K., *Markets in the Name of Socialism: Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism*, Stanford 2011.
- Engerman D.C., *Know Your Enemy. The Rise and Fall of American Soviet Experts*, Oxford 2009.
- Engerman D.C., *Social Science in the Cold War*, 'Isis,' vol. 101, 2010, pp. 393–400.
- Gavin F.J., Lawrence M.A. (eds.), *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, Oxford 2014.
- Halling T., Hansson N., *Akademien der Wissenschaften im Kalten Krieg: Forscherinnen und Forscher aus Schweden und der DDR zwischen Wissensaustausch und Wissenschaftsdiplomatie*, 'Medizinhistorisches Journal,' vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 182–204.
- Hansson N., *Opportunities and challenges for scientific exchange in the Baltic Sea region: Lessons from the Baltic conferences on obstetrics and gynecology (1987–2001)*, 'Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand,' 23 May 2022, doi: 10.1111/aogs.14383.
- Hansson N., Halling T., *Germanophilia or Germanophobia? Contacts between Scandinavia and Germany in the field of urology 1930–1960*, in D. Schultheiss, F. Moll (eds.), *Urology under the Swastika*, Davidsfonds 2017, pp. 212–219.
- Hansson N., Wistrand J. (eds.), *Explorations in Medical History in the Baltic Sea region 1850–2015*, Rochester 2019.
- Harvey W., *Strategies for conducting elite interviews*, 'Qualitative Research,' vol. 11, 2011, pp. 431–441.
- Hansson N., *History of Medicine in the Baltic Sea region*, 'Acta medico-historica Rigensia,' vol. 14, 2021, pp. 7–10.
- Hansson N., *Medizin im Ostseeraum: Deutsch-skandinavischer Wissenstransfer im Kalten Krieg*, 'Medizinhistorisches Journal,' special issue, vol. 57, no. 2, 2022.
- Kordaß A., *Who is living in the post? Perspektiven von Akademiker\*innen aus der DDR auf die deutsche Wiedervereinigung und Nachwendzeit*, 'Berliner Blätter,' vol. 85, 2022, pp. 49–60.
- Mead G.H., *Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt 1934/1998.
- Methling W., *Aufgaben und Ergebnisse der Arbeit der Ehren-, Überleitungs- und Übernahmekommissionen*, in M. Herms, Methling W., W. Pade (eds.), *Die politische Wende an der Universität Rostock 1989 bis 1992: Abbrüche, Umbrüche, Aufbrüche; Kolloquium zur Universitätsgeschichte*, Rostock, 2015, pp. 26–35.
- Mlynář J., *How is Oral History Possible? On Linguistically Universal and Topically Specific Knowledge*, 'The Oral History Review,' vol. 49, no. 1, 2022, pp. 116–132.
- Marsal K. (ed.), *Proceedings. First Baltic Conference on Obstetrics and Gynecology and 84<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Southern Swedish Gynaecological Society, May 22–24, 1987 Rostock-Warnemünde GDR*, Malmö 1987.
- Robin R., *The Making of the Cold War Enemy. Culture and Politics in the Military Intellectual Complex*, Princeton 2001.

- Solovey M., Cravens H. (eds.), *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature*, New York 2012.
- Söhner F., Halling T., Hansson N., *Bridging the Baltic: Insights into Transfers of Knowledge in the Baltic Sea Region during the Cold War via Oral History*, 'Medizinhistorisches Journal,' vol. 57, no. 2, 2022, pp. 205-214.
- Söhner F., Hansson N., *Placing women in Cytogenetics: Lore Zech and the chromosome banding technique*, 'Mol Cytogenet,' vol. 14, no. 1, 2021, pp. 40-44.
- Söhner F., *Intercultural learning and biography research – an approach to the perception of the other*, 'Bildungsforschung,' vol. 1, 2022, pp. 1-15.
- Söhner F., *Oral History in Exile Research – Potential and Limitations of the narrative approach*, in B. Dogramaci [et al.] (eds.), *Urban Exile: Theories, Methods, Research Practices*, Munich 2022.



## Summary

Science communication is regarded as a means of remaining engaged during times of political turmoil, such as the Cold War era. This paper explores the challenges encountered in international interview projects in the field of medicine, drawing on insights from an ongoing oral history initiative within the 'Bridging the Baltic' network. This network focuses on the transfer of knowledge in Northern Europe during the Cold War and beyond.

In addition to our primary analysis, our objective is to gather and archive interviews with professionals from across Europe and beyond, ultimately establishing an interview database dedicated to the history of medicine in Europe during the Cold War period. This platform will include comprehensive texts with associated metadata, enabling further research opportunities. One crucial aspect of future investigation could be the impact of language choice in international interview projects. The possibility of secondary utilisation of data could help offset the substantial personnel and financial investments required for oral history projects. Furthermore, we envision the potential for collaboration with other European oral history projects that share similar research areas.