In a Polish context, Szczecin (German: Stettin) is a medium-sized city, located in the northwestern corner of the country, with poor connections to the capital, Warsaw, and with a declining economy of shipping and shipbuilding. But for many centuries, Stettin was much more important, commercially and geopolitically, as its relative proximity to Sweden and its natural resources formed a north-south axis of "coal-for-iron" trade.

Commercial shipping, like other types of transportation, rests on an interaction among dealers, artifacts, places, and, of course, goods to be transported. An additional factor is the political: the formal rules that those involved are supposed to obey—at least in theory. In shipping, the seas form an additional "gray zone" of rules about territorial waters, economic zones, and bilateral agreements that are utilized or transgressed by states, shipping companies, and captains. The history of Stettin is an example of how the relative force of these factors changes, and how in turn they change realities. In wartime, different rules apply—even for states that are not formally involved.

Stettin is located in the Oder River Valley, which is around eight kilometers wide. This was the northernmost point where overland connections between east and west were possible, with the exception of the complicated estuary in the delta of the Oder and Swine rivers (in Polish, Odra and Świna) on the Baltic coast. The town was also protected from the dangerous coast by the large lagoon between Stettin and Swinemünde (Świnoujście).

Stettin is mentioned in eleventh-century documents as a trading post between Germanic and Slavic-speaking tribes. The intrusion of Germanic colonization resulted in Magdeburg Rights in 1243, and Stettin played an important role in the herring trade with Skåne in Denmark. Politically, the town was mostly the capital of the Duchy of Pomerania, but for around 80 years it was capital of the Swedish province of the same name. In 1720, Szczecin was captured by Prussia, which later became the core of the German Empire.

Contacts with Scandinavia did not cease in 1720. During the 18th century, Stettin was an important importer of Swedish train oil and an exporter of grain. While Stettin was under Swedish rule, the neighboring state of Brandenburg (later Prussia) built canals from the Oder River towards Berlin in order to direct trade away from Pomerania. After annexation by Prussia, Stettin became the major port for both Berlin and Breslau (Wrocław). Its importance grew with industrialization. The Oder River flows from the Silesian coal district, and when the iron ore of northern Sweden became technically usable for steel production thanks to the Thomas process, Stettin was in a strategic position, particularly after Germany lost the Lothringian mines in 1919. Coal from Silesia could also be exported to Sweden, which had no coal. The river is not always navigable, but the Prussian state built a dense net of railways. The Gålivare iron mine was connected to Luleå in 1888, permitting export by ship. The Kiruna mine was connected to Narvik on the Norwegian ice-free Atlantic coast in 1902, but the Luleå-Stettin connection was shorter, simpler and—particularly during wartime—safer.

On the German side, the Swine River was canalized in 1870 and connected to Stettin in 1889 by a deep fairway across the lagoon. The Oder River was prepared for shipping from Breslau almost all year, except during icy conditions. The building of icebreakers became a Stettin specialty, with different versions for the rivers and the lagoon. In 1898, the emperor inaugurated a free port, and traffic on the Oder reached a peak. In 1914 Stettin was again connected to Berlin by a canal with locks to manage the 36-meter difference in elevation. Stettin in 1910 was Germany’s biggest Baltic seaport, with exports of grain, sugar, flour, cement, and chemicals.

Luleå, at the other end of the Baltic Sea, developed into northern Sweden’s leading seaport, not least through iron ore exports. The arriving tonnage had increased considerably, and in 1900 Sweden’s largest cargo ship, the Nordstjernan shipping company’s Oscar Fredrik, loaded 7,000 tons for her maiden voyage. From 1914 to 1915, the number of ships loaded increased from 296 to 985. Iron exports to Germany beat all previous records. Why?

The First World War had begun. While Sweden was neutral, Germany was at war with Great Britain, France, and Russia. Sweden needed coal and Germany needed iron ore. German ships shuttled between Stettin and Luleå, while Russian submarines searched for prey. German ships sought refuge in Swedish territorial waters, and some of these were sunk or hijacked by Russian submarines or destroyers. Russia in such cases falsely asserted they were in international waters, though some German ships clearly were outside Swedish jurisdiction when they were attacked. Almost all such incidents occurred in 1916; for later, the situation in Russia became revolutionary and Russia’s war effort weaker, and after Lenin’s coup against the weak Kerensky government in 1917 Russia established a truce with Germany.

STETTIN (SZCZECIN)
A NODE IN A GEOPOlITICAL NETWORK
by Thomas Lundén

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But shipping is subject to other dangers too. From a diver’s report:


Cause: Collision with fishing vessel.

With the Versailles treaty, the geopolitical conditions changed. There was a ban on the extension of the Stettin free port. After a contested referendum, the region of Upper Silesia was divided between a reduced Germany and a reinstated Poland. Poland now tried to steer coal exports away from German territory, and to that end built a harbor at Gdynia, its only safe access to the Baltic Sea. Because of Poland’s partial annexation of Silesia, Stettin lost its position as the major exporter of coal and grain. In 1919, turnover had fallen to the level of 1873.

The creation of the Polish Corridor and Danzig’s position as a free city under the formal dominion of Poland makes Stettin’s outer harbor, Swinemünde, a sea link to East Prussia and a naval base. But Stettin’s contacts with Lübeck and other Swedish Baltic seaports continue. Hitler’s assumption of power initiates a change. Poland makes Swinemünde, a new shipyard was built in Stettin for small-er vessels and submarines, and in 1940 a naval base was established. “As during the First World War, Stettin developed during World War II as the main transfer place for traffic with Scandinavia.”

In 1939 a new shipyard was built in Stettin for smaller vessels and submarines, and in 1940 a naval base was established. “During the First World War, Stettin developed during World War II as the main transfer place for traffic with Scandinavia.” In October 1940, the ship Ivar called at Luleå in neutral Sweden. The Ivar had been used earlier that year in “Operation Weserübung”, the Nazi attack on Norway. 

W. Kunstmann was established in Swinemünde on April 1, 1870, by Wilhelm Kunstmann, born in 1844. Its first ships were a brig, the Adler, and a schooner, the Minna. In 1889, Kunstmann launched its first steamer, the Clara Siegmann. After that, all Kunstmann ships were steamers, with names ending in -a. In 1891, the company’s office opened in 1886, later to become the company’s headquarters. From 1915 on, all ships were christened with the family name Kunstmann. Their main task was to ship iron ore from Luleå, Öxelösund, and Givö to Stettin, where it was sent on river barges or by rail to Slesia. The Kunstmann company purchased the Mercur Shipyard in Stettin.

After 1933, the operations became increasingly insecure, and in 1936 the company was forced to sell. The Kunstmann family was Jewish. A non-Jewish company, Johannes Fritzen & Sohn, bought them out, and the purchase price was transferred to Great Britain, where the Kunstmanns had been able to emigrate in time. Both buyer and seller were punished for illegal monetary transactions, and Werner Kunstmann Jr., the son of Albert Kunstmann, who died in 1940, spent four months in a British prison for his “cooperation with Nazi Germany”. His father had been awarded an honorary doctorate and an honorary title of Senator at the University of Greifswald; he had been a board member of two German shipowners’ associations and a member of the German delegation to the League of Nations in the 1920s, but all his titles were made void by the Nazi Government. His academic titles were posthumously reinstated in 2000.

The voyage of the Viktoria W. Kunstmann in 1936 was probably the last trip the happy Hitler Youth would take on a “Jewish” ship. First Jewish property was eliminated; later, the Jews themselves. But the Swedish-German coal and ore trade continued, even increased (ref. Fritz, 1974).

In 1939 the ship Viktoria W. Kunstmann was established in Swinemünde on April 1, 1870, by Wilhelm Kunstmann, born in 1844. Its first ships were a brig, the Adler, and a schooner, the Minna. In 1889, Kunstmann launched its first steamer, the Clara Siegmann. After that, all Kunstmann ships were steamers, with names ending in -a. A Stettin.

The answer is political. The shipping company
run further west, at the limit of the Soviet Occupation Zone. But Swedish contact with Szczecin continued. Now all of Silesia (Śląsk) was Polish, and as before the Treaty of Versailles, all the transport routes were within the same state (although now a different one), with the exception of the River Oder, divided between Poland and its “socialist brother country”, the GDR.

The expulsion of Germans from territories under Polish administration met with enormous obstacles. In February 1946, Poland and Great Britain reached an agreement about the transportation of expellees: Operation Swallow would carry 1000 persons per day by sea from Szczecin to Lübeck and 1520 per day to Bad Segeberg by train. Poland would provide trains, food, and protection. But conditions were terrible. The transport through the Soviet Zone of Occupation to Schleswig-Holstein in the British Zone caused enormous problems. A reception camp in Gumi, Szczecin, was a former sugar plant without windows, doors, or furniture, and social conditions were appalling. The camp was planned to hold expellees for one or two days, but the train capacity to the British Zone could not cope with the flow of expellees. Even the Soviet authorities complained about conditions, while Poland replied that the expellees were in such bad condition that Szczecin became one big hospital. Finally the British authorities managed to improve transport capacities to evacuate the German population. A curious, tragic and paradoxical prehistory of Jewish transportation through Stettin was the brutal condition that Szczecin was becoming one big hospital. The British authorities managed to increase transport capacities to evacuate the German population. A curious, tragic and paradoxical prehistory of Jewish transportation through Stettin was the brutal condition that Szczecin became one big hospital. Finally the British authorities managed to increase transport capacities to evacuate the German population.

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The history of Stettin/Szczecin does not end with the expulsion of the Kaiser/Nekrassov/Benitowski. But in the 1950s, the local situation became more stable, for better and for worse, as did Poland’s relations to the outer world. And that is another story, and another geography.

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