

The Opening and Development of the Black Sea for International Trade and Shipping (1774–1853)

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Abstract

The paper presents the development of the Black Sea trade after the peace of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), when the Ottomans were forced to allow the trade of Russian flagged ships beyond the Straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. During the next two decades, in a strained international context, Russia gradually developed a string of trading centres along the northern coast of the Euxine and encouraged foreign merchants to make full use of this new commercial route. European powers were quick in trying to take advantage of the rich agro-pastoral resources of the Black Sea area, but fruitful exchanges were often interrupted by military issues or the Porte’s reluctance to completely open the Black Sea to international trade and shipping. During a second phase, between the beginnings of the French revolutionary wars and the Peace of Adrianople (1829), Black Sea trade faced similar discontinuities and hindrances and was often interrupted by political and diplomatic problems. But the quasi-permanent war on the continent and the disruption of normal agricultural cycles made Russian grain an important and desired alimentary resource, which Mediterranean and western merchants employed to replenish their exhausted warehouses. After the complete opening of the Black Sea to foreign merchants and ship-owners in 1829, the Black Sea witnessed tremendous growth due to several factors. On the one side, with the Straits turned into an indicator of European balance of power, the Western powers supported a more active presence of their merchants on the Ottoman market, which was completely opened to foreign investments by the commercial treaties concluded with the Porte in 1838. Vast areas of Ottoman territories on the eastern and western coasts of the Black Sea became profitable destinations for European merchants, while the Romanian Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia grew to become rivals of Southern Russia in exporting agro-pastoral goods. At the same time, the grain trade of the Russian Empire was oriented towards supplying its southern outlets with the rich harvests of the hinterland, turning the Black Sea into one of the largest grain markets in the world before the Crimean War.

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent conquest of all trading centres along the Black Sea coasts the Ottoman Empire imposed an almost complete prohibition of foreign shipping in what became a Turkish lake by the annexation of Southern Bessarabia and the Budjak in 1538. The area was gradually integrated into a regional economy, whose main function was to supply foodstuffs and raw materials to the increasing market of the Ottoman capital.

During the following three centuries, the Mediterranean and western maritime powers attempted to gain direct access to these cheap

resources, but their requests to have the Black Sea opened to international navigation fell on deaf ears. Passage rights through the Bosphorus remained until 1774 a privilege which the Porte reserved for its own subjects, merchants or ship-owners who provisioned Istanbul with strategic goods such as grain or slaves. Although this closure was not completely hermetic, shipping in the Black Sea was confined to vessels under Ottoman flag, and Istanbul played the role of a staple port in relation to the territories beyond the Bosphorus. As a consequence of this navigational monopoly, the Euxine remained completely peripheral to those economic developments that were shaping the modern world-system since late 15th

century. Few foreigners ventured to an area which came to be less known on 18th century western maps than the distant seas and oceans of the southern hemisphere.

This static picture of a closed sea, ploughed by ships of Greek or Ottoman seafarers settled in Istanbul or in the commercial emporia scattered around the Pontos Euxeinos, completely, irreversibly and rapidly changed after 1774. It took a breach in the jealously guarded status of the Straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to feed a veritable revolution in the European interest for the Black Sea. Political and economic factors intermingled in this new episode of the Eastern Question. Apparently not only the fate of the Ottoman Empire was at stake, but also its very impressive economic heritage – a fresh route eastwards, with ramifications for the Balkans, Central Europe, Poland, Russia, the Caucasus, and Persia. The golden wool of the Argonauts had now more palpable shapes: naval stores, grain and agro-pastoral goods.

The classical story of restricted and regional trade caught in the vortex of the great global commercial exchanges was clearly visible here and now. Old and new, state and private, East and West met in the Black Sea, with state actors regulating the macro level of political economy and with bold private enterprisers acting as the bacteria that generated change at the micro level of society itself. However, it took long and systematic diplomatic, administrative and economic efforts to turn a marginal sea into one of the largest grain supplying areas of the world. This narrative will briefly focus on the profound political and economic transformations that marked the “rediscovery” of the Black Sea by the western world.

PHASE I – UNLOCKING THE BLACK SEA FROM WITHIN (1774–1798)

With the maritime powers disallowed from entering the Black Sea, it took a terrestrial empire that mastered the eastern steppe lands to force the Bosphorus from within the Euxine. Russia seemed fated to this destiny. She steadily approached the warm seas starting with the 17th century, and with a coherent and persevering policy secured the navigation of Russian commercial ships in the Sea of Azov, the antechamber of the Black Sea. The able Catherine II, following in the political footsteps of her predecessors, was conscious that Russia’s future as a European power greatly depended on militarily and economically gaining a firm hold of the Black Sea. After imposing her control in the two buffer areas that stood in Russia’s way (Poland and the Crimean Khanate), Catherine defeated the Porte in the war of 1768–1774 and by the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (21 July 1774) Russia gained a strategic foothold on the northern Black Sea coast, annexing the Kuban and Terek areas, the ports of Azov and Taganrog, at the mouth of the Don, the fortresses of Kerch and Yenikale, and a small region between the lower courses of the rivers Bug and Dnieper, together with the mouth of the latter and the fortress of Kinburn, a territory securing a crucial connection with the core provinces of the Empire. Yet the greatest success of tsarist diplomacy was the right granted to Russian ships to sail in the Black Sea and pass through the Straits, a provision with momentous political and economic consequences for the entire area.

The annexation of the Crimea in April 1783 seemed to make a new Russo-Turkish war imminent, but it only broke out in 1787, and Austria joined it in February 1788, following the Christian empires’ plans to parti-

tion Ottoman territories. The treaty of Jassy (9 January 1792) confirmed Russia's possession of the Crimea and of the strategic fortress of Ochakiv, so that in less than two decades Russia secured her control over the entire northern coastline of the Euxine, a territorial development that was to reshape not only the political and military balance of the Pontic basin, but combined with the granting of passage right through the Turkish Straits for Russian ships also greatly augmented the commercial significance of the area. However, the integration of these territories into the rapidly growing Tsarist Empire and their linkage to the regional and international commercial routes required the imposition of several administrative, economic and social reforms.

Russia's military conquests were soon followed by explicit policies of economic integration within the structure of the empire, of demographic growth and of social reform. Several administrative decrees organised the territory of New Russia, culminating with the foundation of the Ekaterinoslav Viceroyalty in 1784. Large estates were donated to the nobiliary elite, and ample colonisation programs were enforced, in order to populate and economically exploit these extensive and fertile steppe lands. Domestic and foreign colonists were settled in the province, so that the population of the territories making up the Viceroyalty increased during these decades from about 263,000 to almost 820,000 inhabitants.

These measures profoundly transformed the internal economic structure of New Russia, gradually providing to the markets a greater surplus of agricultural goods and products that lay at the foundation of Russia's economic growth in the 19th century. In order to supply this merchandise to the foreign markets, imperial authorities followed a coherent policy of constructing an entire trading infrastructure.

The creation of a string of commercial emporia along the northern coastline of the Black Sea provided the area with veritable economic lungs, capable of adapting the area to a capitalist economy. The port of Taganrog in the Sea of Azov, which was strategically placed close to the mouth of the Don River, was rebuilt in 1769 and shortly became the centre of considerable trade and shipping. The population increased from a few hundred inhabitants in 1774 to about 6,000 in 1793. Mariupol, founded by Greek settlers from the Crimea, was developed by several imperial privileges. Kerch, a very small village in 1774, reached a population of over 3,000 inhabitants by 1787 and survived by the lighterage operations carried for the ships crossing the homonymous strait. Equally promising was the Dnieper region, whose prospects increased after the foundation of Kherson in 1778 as a commercial and naval base, the intended "St. Petersburg of the South." Greatly supported by local and central authorities, it slowly became an important commercial gateway binding European maritime routes to the continental roads leading deep into Russia and Poland. After the acquisition of the Crimea, Sevastopol was established on the site of a natural harbour and became the operational base of Russia's Black Sea navy. Theodosia, the prosperous medieval Caffa, was re-established, but, similarly to all Crimean outlets, it suffered due to its bad connections with the rest of the empire.

At the same time, the authorities in St. Petersburg tried to encourage commercial relations with the Mediterranean and Western powers. In 1782 Catherine II issued an edict providing a reduction of 25 percent of export and import duties payable in the southern ports for all Russian subjects or traders from privileged countries. Two years later, the ports of the Black Sea were formally opened

to the merchants and ship-owners of all nations. Another ukase provided additional preferential tariffs and allowed the export of Polish goods through Russia's southern ports.

Several European courts promptly responded to these commercial overtures. Austria, which was also allowed free navigation in the Black Sea, signed a commercial agreement with Russia in 1785. Already aware of the economic value of the Euxine, France developed direct trading relations with Russia's southern ports, and the commercial treaty of 1787 stipulated further fiscal and customs reductions for direct economic exchanges. Similar treaties were soon concluded with other states. The commercial treaty with the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, signed on 17 January 1787, provided for mutual reductions by one fourth of tariff charges on goods exported or imported via the Black Sea. Another agreement with Portugal referred to the mutual reduction of duties by one half when several listed goods were imported directly.

Russia's regional position depended on her capacity to maintain a strong navy in the Black Sea. This consisted of the main fleet based at Sevastopol and a smaller squadron stationed at Kherson. The power of these warships was demonstrated during the conflict that broke out in 1787, when the fortress of Ochakiv became the key to a larger strategic zone. The Ottoman fleet was destroyed in 1788 by the navy in Sevastopol and the citadel fell, thus experiencing a similar fate to all major Ottoman strongholds in the area (Akkerman and Bender on the Dniester, Kilia and Ismail on the Danube). These vessels and their crews managed to chart the Black Sea, a significant effort for improving navigational safety on a sea that was little known to Russian and foreign seafarers alike.

Other local powers were also interested

in the increasing prospects of the Black Sea trade. The First Partition of Poland in 1772 was a great economic blow to the kingdom's commercial interests in the Baltic area, as the port of Gdańsk (Danzig) was suffocated by Prussia's customs policy. Faced with an acute economic crisis, authorities in Warsaw attempted to redirect the country's trade towards the Black Sea. The network of internal rivers (the Dniester, the Dnieper and the Bug) could be profitably used to ship Polish goods to Russian or Turkish outlets, while the same routes were seen as advantageous solutions for encouraging foreign imports into Poland. Prince August Sulkowski presented these plans during a visit to Paris in 1779, when he advertised the possibility of exporting Polish grain, liquors, salted meat, flax, hemp, hides, and furs, cheap and qualitative resources for France's growing market.

In 1782 a "Polish Company for Oriental Trade" was founded in Warsaw, and by French mediation the Russian port of Kherson was chosen as the hub of Polish Black Sea trade. The economic development of Poland's south-eastern provinces was greatly encouraged by the central and regional authorities, which invested in the modernisation of land routes and inland waterways capable of carrying bulky goods to the Black Sea outlets. Russia granted further privileges to the Polish merchants involved in this commerce. Polish goods were allowed free transit through New Russia, a reduction of 25 percent in customs duties was applied to Polish exports to Russia, and the import of goods destined for Poland enjoyed further fiscal benefits.

During the peaceful interval of 1784–1787, exports from Poland through Kherson increased exponentially. The Dniester was a favourite waterway for shipping goods from Podolia, while other rivers (the Pripet, the

Slucz, the Horyn and the Berezina) were used for supplying timber from the rich inland forests. Wheat also became profitable merchandise for Polish landlords and was in high demand in Mediterranean ports such as Alexandria, Marseille or Barcelona. In 1785, for example, the wheat sent from Poland to Kherson amounted to 3 million Zlotys, or 60 percent of the 4,900,780 Zlotys that accounted for the port's trade. By this liberal policy, Russia was desired to increase the commerce of her newly founded ports, but she also aimed to prevent direct contacts between the Polish and the foreign merchants (mainly French) involved in Black Sea trade. However, the Ottomans applied a completely different policy and only allowed the transit of Polish goods with the payment of rather large customs duties. In 1792, a Polish envoy, Piotr Potocki, was sent to Constantinople to discuss the conclusion of a trade agreement with the Porte, but the political situation in Poland had already become critical; the war between Poland and Russia and the subsequent partitions of Poland put an end to the flourishing independent Polish trade through the Black Sea and completed its integration into the growing commerce of Southern Russia.

Austria was also accelerating her march towards the Black Sea along the Danube route, a development facilitated by the provisions of the treaties of Passarowitz (1718) and Belgrade (1739), but the Habsburgs' efforts were frustrated due to several factors, geographical and technical, as the barrier of the Iron Gates was hardly passable by commercial ships. The first enterpriser to venture beyond this perilous gorge was Nicolaus Ernst Kleeman, who left in the autumn of 1768 for the Lower Danube and headed to the khan's residence in the Crimea and then to Constantinople. Although the tradesman had many mishaps, his manufac-

tures (ironware, gallantry, cotton textiles and general wares) were sold for a huge profit – 87 $\frac{3}{4}$ percent, proving the high productivity of developing the Danubian commercial route.

The increasing commerce of the Black Sea after 1774 was equally closely scrutinised by several private investors and the imperial authorities in Vienna. The German company of Willehoffen & Co., active in the Levant, sensed the profitability of trading Austrian merchandise in the Euxine. His overtures were favourably received by Emperor Joseph II, who supported a commercial expedition to the markets of the Principalities, of the Crimea and of Constantinople, with the view of turning the Danube into a permanent and lucrative artery for exporting Austrian manufactures. In 1782 Joseph offered an imperial ship, mastered by Captain Georg Lauterer, a good connoisseur of the Lower Danube (instructed with additional cartographical tasks), to convey down the Danube a large variety of Austrian goods (textiles, porcelain, glassware, mirrors, fashion goods, metal works, common wares, wine), mostly getting to Kherson. Willehoffen organised a second expedition in 1783, and more Austrian investors soon followed suit and took advantage of these regional commercial opportunities, but all efforts suffered from the same hindrance – the passage of the Iron Gates was not only perilous in itself, but it was also financially burdening.

Diplomatic support for developing this trade led to the conclusion of a commercial agreement between Austria and the Ottoman Empire on 24 February 1784. The convention regulated the imports of Austrian merchandise into Turkey (metalwork, mining, china, mirrors, fabrics, glass and glassware, etc.), and Austrian navigation was allowed down to Vidin or Ruse, where goods were transhipped on Ottoman vessels. Customs rates were fixed

at 3 percent, and Austrian shipping into the Black Sea, through the Straits, was also allowed. The commercial treaty of 1784 opened another direct route of Austrian initiative into the Black Sea, encouraging entrepreneurs in Trieste to trade in the area, both in Russian and Danubian ports. However, the outbreak of war in 1787 and Austria's involvement in the conflict in 1788 put a quick end to these developments.

Besides the products supplied by Russian ports, in the last quarter of the 18th century foreign merchants also became interested in the commercial resources of the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, autonomous states under Turkish domination. A "relative" monopoly over their foreign trade meant that they were compelled to supply large quantities of grain (mainly wheat and barley), livestock (sheep), animal fat, butter, pressed cheese, honey, wax, timber, saltpeter, etc. for the Porte's needs either free or at fixed prices much under the real value of the merchandise. In the context of Russia's anti-Turkish offensive, the treaty of 1774 and a series of subsequent documents restricted the Porte's interferences in the Principalities' domestic life, limiting its requirements to a fixed amount of money and compelling it to purchase the products at local market prices.

Besides the restrictive trade in the products requisitioned by the Porte, Moldavia and Wallachia were also engaged in continuously increasing free commercial exchanges with the Ottoman Empire and other partners (Austria in the first place). The main categories of freely exported merchandise were live animals and animal products, technical plants, worked textiles, raw and worked hides, salt, etc., whereas the main imports were represented by textiles, fruit and luxury goods. When Istanbul was abundantly supplied, as in was the case in

1775, the export of wheat was freely allowed from the Principalities.

The profitability of the new Black Sea market was rapidly sensed by the Mediterranean traders, who were already powerful in Constantinople. Trading in the Black Sea had always been an important objective for French merchants, taking into account their privileged position in the Levant and the fact that the northern route to Russia was dominated by English, Dutch and Hanseatic middlemen. The first direct French interests in the Euxine were related to the Crimean Khanate, a valuable relay between the rich resources of the Russian provinces and the Constantinopolitan and Mediterranean markets. The Russian-Turkish conflict of 1768–1774 completely changed France's attitude regarding the Black Sea. On the one hand the diplomats in Versailles tried to support the Porte and preserve the privileges French traders enjoyed on the Ottoman markets; on the other hand, they wanted to benefit from the advantages resulting from opening a direct commercial route between Marseilles and New Russia. Mercantile circles in southern French ports were equally interested in encouraging trade exchanges with Poland, forced to redirect its agro-pastoral goods and raw materials southwards. The foundation of Kherson in 1778 and Russia's policy to boost the export trade of her new provinces nourished great economic expectations among French merchants.

This new phase in French commercial involvement in the Black Sea was initiated by the activity of an enterprising merchant, Antoine Anthoine, who was well accustomed to the trading conditions of the Near East. In 1781, commissioned by the French and Russian ambassadors in Constantinople, he inspected several Russian Black Sea ports, including the emerging outlet of Kherson, where he es-

established a commercial house. Thanks to his mediation, Polish and Russian officials agreed to cooperate and turn Kherson into the commercial gate of a larger region, linked to the markets of Russia, Poland, Austria, the Danubian Principalities and the Mediterranean Sea. During the 1780s, 15 commercial houses traded with Kherson, the most important being owned by French, German or Swiss merchants (Anthoine, Veuve Councler, Folsch et Hornbostel, Rolland, Straforello, etc.). Ships under Russian colours usually loaded at Marseille alcoholic beverages (wine), textiles (Lyon fabrics, velvet, fine linen) and colonial goods and returned laden with hemp, wax, honey and timber; but wheat started to become the most traded product and waswell received on the Mediterranean markets.

Geography placed the Italian states in a good position to benefit from the opening of the Black Sea to international shipping. The Venetian Republic was excellently situated in this context due to the large fleet it had in the Eastern Mediterranean and the skill of its Greek subjects, the most numerous and active seafarers in the Euxine. Hoisting the Russian flag, a privilege rather easily acquired, these Greek seafarers became well implanted in the international trade of New Russia and the Danubian Principalities. According to statistical information from 1786, 56 Venetian ships sailed under Russian flag (most of them belonging to Greek and Slavic Dalmatian ship-owners and merchants) in the Black Sea, making Venice a serious actor of this growing trade.

As for Britain, its involvement in the Black Sea during this period had more to do with political than with commercial reasons, as it found itself in a great colonial rivalry against France. After 1774 British diplomats reported to the Foreign Office about the acquisition of

naval supplies (masts and timber) at Kherson by French traders and about the commercial opportunities of the Balkans and Black Sea coasts, but direct British participation in this commerce was still absent. However, Russia's conquest and maintenance of Ochakiv, the last Ottoman stronghold on the northern shore of the Black Sea, made English statesmen pay more attention to the political and commercial developments that shaped the political geography of the area in the early 1790s.

PHASE II – THE BLACK SEA TRADE IN TIMES OF WAR (1798–1829)

This second phase in the opening of the Black Sea to international trade and shipping was greatly affected by the military developments that had started in Western Europe and which had also spread to their vortex the Near East, turning the Turkish Straits into the crux of the continental balance of power.

During the first years of the French revolutionary wars, the political attitude of the Ottoman leadership remained reserved, until naval and military events in the Eastern Mediterranean seemed to completely alter the regional status quo. The annexation of the Ionian Islands by France in 1797 was seen as a further step towards a dangerous expansion in the Levant, so that the Porte requested the Ionian archipelago in return for concessions to French trade in the Levant and free entrance into the Black Sea. Napoleon's campaign in Egypt in 1798 prompted Sultan Selim III to declare war on France and to seek an alliance with Britain and Russia. Agreements were concluded in January 1799, with the signatory parties guaranteeing Ottoman integrity, but also with Russian warships being granted the right of passage through the Straits for the

duration of that war. These perilous circumstances allowed British diplomats to also draw from the Porte the right for British commercial ships to sail into the Black Sea, a privilege that became operational only several years later (1803), after the usual protracted negotiations of Ottoman diplomats. However, access for French merchants to the Black Sea was also agreed upon in the French-Turkish peace treaty of Amiens (1802), stimulating the hopes for a quick recovery of Marseille's commercial connections in the Black Sea.

But it was not the best time for exploiting the resources of this area, as the Straits were deeply caught in the avatars of Napoleonic policy. In 1805 the Porte renewed the 1799 alliance, but the French emperor's overwhelming victories and an able propaganda in Constantinople (with promises of returning the Crimea to its former suzerain) gave France the upper hand. In 1806, a new Russian-Ottoman war broke out, and the Danubian Principalities were readily occupied by tsarist troops. Britain's diplomatic response was to disclose the ripe plans designed after the imperial meetings of Tilsit and Erfurt to divide the Ottoman Empire between France and Russia. In 1809 the peace of the Dardanelles provided Britain with large concessions for trading in the Ottoman dominions, the Black Sea included, but with war still raging the Euxine remained a peripheral destination for the Mediterranean and western traders and shippers.

During this period, Russia continued her slow yet effective march on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. When Tiflis was captured by the Persians in September 1795, Russia readily intervened apparently to defend Georgian independence, but then she gradually annexed several territories (Imretia, Mingrelia, Abkhazia) that raised great concerns equally in Persia and the Ottoman Empire. Concurrently, by

controlling the important ports of Sukhum and Redut Kale she virtually mastered about 120 miles of the eastern coastline of the Black Sea.

After the conclusion of the 1815 Vienna peace treaty, the Black Sea basin remained in an unstable political situation. When the Greek independence war broke out in 1821, the Porte attempted to hurt the insurgents by checking the flourishing trade carried in Southern Russia by Greek merchants and ship-owners. On several occasions Sultan Mahmud II claimed his right to pre-empt foreign cargoes of foodstuffs passing through the Straits to feed Istanbul and tried to prohibit Greek-owned ships sailing under Russian flag from passing beyond the Straits. The Greek-Ottoman conflict eventually prompted the involvement of European powers, and following the 1826 Anglo-Russian protocol tsarist diplomats forced the conclusion of the Russian-Ottoman convention of Akkerman. It recognised Russia's possessions in the Caucasus, the Ottomans accepted Sukhum and other points on the Abkhazian coast as Russian territories, and merchants under Russian flag were free to trade on all domestic Ottoman waterways. The subsequent crisis in the Near East, the defeat of the Ottoman fleet at Navarino (1827) and the Russian-Ottoman war of 1828–1829 were further challenges for the Straits, virtually closed to international shipping during these conflicts. Finally, by the peace of Adrianople (14 September 1829) Russia annexed the mouths of the Danube down to the St. George branch, and in Asia the Porte recognised the cessation of Georgia and Eastern Armenia, but Russia also claimed suzerainty over Circassia. However, the most important provision for this narrative was the right of free passage through the Turkish Straits for all Russian and foreign merchants.

It was a great success for tsarist diploma-

cy which opened a new phase in the history of the Black Sea. By mid 1820s most European powers had secured commercial agreements with the Porte, allowing them access into the Black Sea, but this free passage still largely depended upon Turkish caprices and was often interrupted. As the trade between Southern Russian ports and Western Europe was carried aboard foreign ships, it was extremely important for Russia to secure such an advantageous stipulation, which greatly developed the commercial prospects of the entire Black Sea area.

The changing constellation of the Near East before the Adrianople Treaty allowed discontinuous but great opportunities for increasing the commercial significance of the Black Sea basin. Russia continued to invest in her southern provinces, and Catherine's policy was closely followed by Tsars Paul and Alexander I. Commercial treaties were signed with England (1797), Portugal (1798), Sweden (1801) and Prussia (1806), with the same liberal attitude shown in relation to Mediterranean and western merchants. New Russia, divided into the provinces of Ekaterinoslav, Nikolayev (later Kherson), Taurida (the Crimea) and the oblast of Bessarabia (ruptured in 1812 from the province of Moldavia), was placed under a single Governor-General, a position occupied during the first half of the 19th century by able officials, who greatly contributed to the modernisation of the area: the Duke of Richelieu, Count Langeron, M. S. Vorontsov and P. I. Fyodorov.

Economic reforms were encouraged throughout this vast hinterland. Domestic and foreign immigration was made attractive by extensive political, religious and juridical privileges granted to the colonists, but also by enormous estates of free land given to landlords. The population increased to 1.6 million by 1813 and more than 2 million by the

mid 1820s, a demographic growth that meant a similar upsurge of the agricultural output. Cereal cultivation was naturally the main economic branch, but sheep breeding, vine culture and planting of fruit trees also greatly developed, diversifying the variety of goods supplied by New Russia to the foreign markets.

The string of Black Sea outlets continued to be encouraged, with the greatest attention paid to the port-city of Odessa, founded in 1794 on the site of a small Ottoman fort. Situated in an excellent geographical position, on a high terrace overlooking the sea, at almost equal distance between the mouths of the rivers Dniester and Bug, and also close to the mouths of the Danube, Odessa received several privileges and concessions which stimulated its rapid growth. With the influx of foreign and Russian colonists, the population grew rapidly, from about 8,000 in 1803 to 50,000 by 1835 and 100,000 by the end of the Crimean War. Catherine's initial concessions were extended and renewed by Alexander I. In 1803 the customs duties of all Russian Black Sea ports were lowered by 25 percent, and in 1804 Odessite merchants were allowed to store goods in local warehouses up to five years, without paying duty until the commodities were sold or reshipped, a privilege also granted to Taganrog in 1806. But the greatest advantage was the establishment of the free port, effective between 1819 and 1857, which turned Odessa into the most convenient outlet for large grain growing districts of the Russian Empire, such as south-eastern Poland, western Ukraine and Bessarabia. Endowed with such advantages, Odessa became the symbol of Russia's interest in encouraging its foreign trade. The city continuously thrived and was endowed with all institutions necessary for supporting its commercial activity (banks,

commercial courts, chamber of commerce, insurance offices, etc.). Its evolution during this period, as visible in Table 1 below, was largely influenced by the situation of the Turkish Straits, with free passage often hindered by the conflicts the Porte was involved in.

Table I
The trade of Odessa

Years	Exports	Imports
	Average value (1,000 metal rubles)	
1795	68	–
1796	172	–
1802–1805	2,508	1,452
1806–1810	1,611	1,852
1811–1815	5,081	2,646
1816–1820	6,790	944
1821–1825	4,467	1,970
1826–1829	2,918	1,944

Source: Harvey 1938: 76

Other port-cities were also encouraged, but their fortune was less favourable. Crimean harbours lacked proper connections to the productive hinterlands, and Sevastopol only served as the base of the Russian navy. Kherson and Nikolayev were handicapped by their placement in marshy areas and the lack of investments for developing inland shipping on the Dniester and Bug rivers. The ports of the Sea of Azov were much better interconnected with the agricultural districts of eastern Ukraine, the southern Urals, and southwestern Siberia, so that Rostov, Taganrog and Mariupol gradually increased and exported a large variety of goods, ranging from cereals to iron, butter, tallow, rope, cordage, sailcloth, hemp, caviar, leather, skins and furs. But their further expansion was still hindered by the shallowness of the Sea of Azov, which

only allowed the shipping of flat-bottomed ships, increasing the freight due to the necessity of transshipping goods aboard lighters.

During these decades, despite the still difficult access through the Straits, the most powerful stimulus for Russian grain exports came from Mediterranean and Western Europe, a demand related to the almost continuous war on the continent and the disruption of normal agricultural production cycles. The Black Sea was an excellent grain growing area, and when the Straits were open merchants invaded it. Nine-hundred ships entered the Black Sea in 1803, and most of them loaded wheat at Odessa and Taganrog, replenishing the warehouses of European deposit ports. The end of the Napoleonic wars allowed a new upsurge of Russia's grain exports, and in 1815 about 1,500 ships entered the Black Sea, mainly in

search of grain. The demand remained high in the following years due to widespread crop failures in Western Europe between 1816 and 1818. Naturally enough, the organisation of Russian agriculture followed these new commercial imperatives, and cultivated estates grew proportionately, with a similar increase in quality. The production of other agro-pastoral goods, such as linseed, wool or tallow, was also encouraged, and natural conditions, with extremely fertile lands, and the social system, with cheap labour services of dependent peasants, allowed their production at competitive market prices.

This period of almost continuous conflict throughout Europe decisively shaped the economic structure of southern Russia. Grain was not the main commodity in Russia's Black Sea ports in late 18th century, as the area lacked the appropriate production, transport and marketing infrastructure necessary to offer to foreign merchants the surplus of inland districts. But the area had several great opportunities: the huge expanse of extremely fertile land, excellent climatic conditions for cereal growing, estate owners ready to invest in agriculture and able managers who convinced the central government to support these economic activities. Thus by the early 19th century South Russia emerged as a favourite destination for the grain hungry nations of Europe, and the only barrier for a continuous upsurge of grain exports was the still complicated question of passage through the Turkish Straits.

Throughout this second phase, most of the significant Black Sea trade was limited to the Russian ports on its northern coast. The commerce of the Danubian outlets continued to increase, but the monopolistic provisions of the Porte regarding the free trade of several agro-pastoral products did not encourage large investments in local agriculture and

trade. However, the sales of many freely exported commodities multiplied both at the Danube and in other Ottoman Black Sea ports, such as the Balkan outlet of Varna or the ports of Trabzon and Samsun, well linked to Persia, the Caspian Sea and Asia Minor.

PHASE III – FREE TRADE IN AN OPEN SEA (1829–1853)

As mentioned above, the Russian-Ottoman peace treaty of Adrianople radically altered the balance of power and the economic significance of the Black Sea basin. The beneficial consequences of the treaty, securing free access to Mediterranean and western markets and ship-owners to markets still little exploited commercially were soon overshadowed by Russia's apparent plans in the area, especially in the two buffer zones where the Ottoman and Russian empires collided – in the Danubian Principalities and in the Caucasus. In 1833, following the acute crisis in the Near East related to the ambitions of the powerful Pasha of Egypt, Mehmet Ali, Russia scored a huge diplomatic success by signing with the Porte the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi. By this, the Ottomans were to close the Straits to foreign warships, but to keep them open for the Russian navy in case the latter was involved in a conflict. Considering that Russia endangered the continental balance of power by turning the Ottoman Empire into a sort of protectorate or vassal state, Britain, France and Austria paid increasing attention to the Black Sea area, as the growth of Russia's fleet was an additional threat to the Ottoman capital and to the preservation of the Porte's territorial integrity. Western interest in the fate of the Danubian Principalities and of Circassia consequently increased, making European policymakers (the English in the first place) keen on sup-

porting the national movements of Romanians and Circassians, as long as they preserved an anti-Russian character and did not contest the lawful Ottoman domination.

Politics and economy went hand in hand, and the English diplomatic representatives at Constantinople encouraged an active commercial presence of British tradesmen and ship-owners on the eastern and western shores of the Euxine. Moreover, as a direct menace to British interests in Persia and further east, towards India, Russia's impositions in Circassia were grievously felt in London. Unable to legally contest this domination, the Foreign Office was at least desirous not to officially recognise it. This rivalry nourished a spectacular diplomatic incident in the mid 1830s, when an inflamed Russophobe, David Urquhart, carefully planned a Russo-British conflict in the area. The schooner "Vixen" was hired by several of his associates to carry salt from Wallachia to the Caucasus, to a region where the Russian government had already restricted trade to posts possessing quarantine stations and customs houses. As envisioned by Urquhart, the adventure of "Vixen" ended quickly in November 1836, when the vessel was intercepted by a Russian warship in the bay of Sudzhuk-Kale. The confiscation of the vessel caused public uproar in Britain, but the two governments resolved the issue, a conciliatory solution that meant a *de facto* acceptance of Russia's possession of the Circassian coast. Both the Lower Danube and Circassia had been rather marginal regions for direct British economic involvement in the context of the Ottoman monopolistic policy in the Black Sea basin, but British manufactures brought via Leipzig or Constantinople started to enjoy large popularity among local consumers. Starting with the 1830s, the Danubian Principalities and the Caucasus became

an increasingly frequent destination for British and European entrepreneurs who had discovered their great commercial prospects.

Finally to conclude with the political component of this phase the renewed Near Eastern crisis of the late 1830s led to the signing of the Straits Convention of July 1841. European Powers convened that "the passage of the Straits of the Dardanelles and of the Bosphorus was always to be closed to foreign ships of war, so long as the Porte is at peace". It put an end to Russia's dominant position at the Straits, but it also showed the huge strategic importance of the Black Sea area. And not only from a political perspective, but also economically as the industrialising European nations turned their interest towards the resources of the Black Sea, where Russia was now closely followed by a free trading Ottoman Empire.

Grain trade in the Black Sea was greatly encouraged by the varying tariff policies of European cabinets regarding the importation of cereals. The Mediterranean and Western Powers, who were experiencing increasing industrial development, needed larger crops to feed their growing urban population. Britain was the largest market and its grain imports were regulated by several Corn Laws. In 1828, British authorities introduced a new system of taxing grain imports, the so called "sliding scale," designed to only admit enough foreign grain so as to stabilise local prices. This pattern, which in fact favoured huge grain speculations, was followed throughout most of Western and Northern Europe. When these Corn Laws were abolished in the mid 1840s, the British model was quickly followed throughout Europe and the new grain frenzy of the late 1840s and early 1850s was mainly nourished by the Black Sea.

Another factor that largely favoured the commercial relevance of the area was the es-

establishment of steamship services in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. In 1836–1837 several lines were inaugurated and they accelerated the market integration of the area. On the one hand the *Donau Dampfschiffahrts Gesellschaft*, with political and financial support from the Austrian government, linked her fluvial and maritime steamers, securing an uninterrupted, safe and quick voyage between Vienna and Constantinople, with the Danubian outlets of Brăila and Galați acting as relay ports for the transit of passengers and cargo. At the same time, two steamship lines started to ply from the Ottoman capital to Samsun and Trabzon. By the next decade, competition sharpened, with British, Austrian, and Ottoman vessels joining the Golden Horn to the Ottoman districts west and east of the Bosphorus, but also with Russian steamers plying between Odessa, the Danube, the Azov and Constantinople. The Black Sea was now fully integrated into the economic rhythms of the Eastern Mediterranean and the transports of goods from this area started to enter an age of predictability.

Not least of all, the success of Black Sea trade was related to the activity of a vast network of merchants with excellent relations in the largest European deposit ports. The first traders who took advantage of these economic prospects were Greek and Italian middlemen active in the Near East, who became agents for some of the largest entrepreneurial family companies of the age: Argenti, Negroponte, Ralli, Sechiari, Pana, etc. These examples of Danubian ports are relevant for the entire Black Sea basin. The Argentis had representatives in Britain and at Marseille, but they had close relatives in the families of Ionides, Ralli, Radocanachi and Schilizzi, whereas the Negropontes, present at Marseille, Alexandria and Odessa, were related to many other fami-

lies from this mercantile network. Common kinship secured all these ethnic-regional commercial houses reliable connections, a decisive fact taking into account the short interval in which the best transactions were concluded, the perishable character of the goods, the long journey from the Black Sea to the destination ports, all entailing quick decisions and the guaranty that, at the other end of the commercial route, a serious and reliable economic partner was waiting. The Italian merchants were the most notable competitors of the Greeks. One of the largest commercial houses was that of the Genoese brothers Filippo, Antonio and Francesco Pedemonte. Founded in 1831, it was active under different names (*Pedemonte e Peretti*, *Fratelli Pedemonte*, *Pedemonte e Bottaro* or *Francesco Pedemonte*). It owned many immovable properties (houses, storehouses) in Galați and Brăila, it had branches in Brăila and Calafat, and intended to open other agencies in remote areas of the Principalities, where grain price was much lower. In 1839–1840 the house had its own small fleet, enjoying profitable commercial connections with Genoa, Constantinople, Naples, Leghorn, Trieste, Messina, Marseille, Nyssa, Toulon, Algiers, Calais, Malta and London. In the early 1840s, it had a turnover of 14 million lei (about 450,000 ducats) and a capital of 2.4 million lei (77,500 ducats), a huge amount for that time. These tradesmen, most of them foreigners, were the most diligent promoters of modernisation in Russia and the Ottoman territories not only in economic terms, but also from a cultural perspective. Without alluding to their role as members in commissions for the embellishment of these cities, as supporters for the establishment of public and private schools, as sponsors of cultural or religious institutions (theatres and churches), reference should be made to some of the fields related

to trade itself: credit institutions, the establishment of commodity exchanges, the creation of insurance companies or the publication of commercial journals. As competition sharpened, western merchants started to invest directly in the resources of the Black Sea area, whose resources also attracted significant Jewish capital.

During this quarter century the Black Sea trade was divided between the two empires that mastered its coasts: Russia and Turkey. In the Tsarist Empire, the central government in St. Petersburg and the regional authorities in New Russia continued the same policy of stimulating population growth and of increas-

ing the quantity and quality of its agricultural output. After 1829 more districts (Podolia, Volhynia, Kiev, Kharkov, Voronezh, etc.) directed their harvests through this southern route, as market prices made land transport costs worthwhile. This huge demand for grain transformed everything, from production to transport, and the Black Sea gradually imposed itself as the main corridor for the export of Russia's agricultural surplus, with about two thirds of Russian grain exported via her southern outlets (Table 2). Most of these cereals were based on by wheat, whose increasing quality made it well received on European markets (Table 3). Other cereals exported from New Russia included rye, barley, oats, buckwheat, etc.

Table 2
Exports of all Russian grain

Years	European Russia	Black and Azov Seas	Percent of Black Sea and Azov
	1,000 chetverts		%
1831–1835	1,919	868	45.23
1836–1840	2,941	2,101	71.43
1841–1845	2,791	2,132	76.38
1846–1850	5,718	3,409	59.61
1851–1853	7,569	4,894	64.65

Source: Harvey 1938: 105

Table 3
Exports of all Russian wheat

Years	European Russia	Black and Azov Seas	Percent of Black Sea and Azov
	1,000 chetverts		%
1831–1835	1,056	820	77.65
1836–1840	2,069	1,952	94.34
1841–1845	2,133	2,022	94.79
1846–1850	3,481	3,133	90.00
1851–1853	4,745	4,176	88.00

Source: Harvey 1938: 105

Odessa was by far the largest port of the Black Sea. It continued to expand in these decades (Table 4), and it had all the institutions needed for modern commercial exchanges: banking houses, foreign and domestic trading firms, consulates, warehouses. The outlet of an ever expanding hinterland, stretching across the broad belt of black soil steppe, Odessa received its wheat via cart and barge and exported it in large ships well received in its deep harbour. This was an important privilege in relation to the other Russian ports, as Nikolayev, situated 22 miles from the mouth of the river Bug, and Kherson, located on the Dnieper, were inaccessible to large ships owing to the silting of the channel and the Ochakiv bar, while the Azov ports of Mari-

upol, Rostov on Don, and Taganrog suffered from the shallowness of the sea and the dangerous passage through the Yenikale Channel. Taganrog was the only port that enjoyed an important upsurge during this period, but it still was about five times smaller than Odessa (Table 5).

After 1829, the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia witnessed a veritable commercial revolution. The abolishment of the Porte's relative commercial "monopoly" and the almost simultaneous introduction of steam navigation on the Danube (1830) turned the Danubian ports of Brăila and Galați into important suppliers of grains on the European markets, but also into large importers of industrial goods from western countries. The

Table 4
Trade of Odessa

Years	Exports	Imports	Tonnage of ships
	Value (1,000 gold rubles)		1,000 tons
1831–1835	5,392	3,539	123
1836–1840	10,073	4,687	202
1841–1845	12,002	4,684	212
1846–1850	18,092	6,975	322
1851–1853	18,862	7,070	344

Source: Harvey 1938: 114

Table 5
Trade of Taganrog

Years	Exports	Imports	Tonnage of ships
	1,000 gold rubles		1,000 tons
1831–1835	2,296	1,091	51
1836–1840	2,518	1,443	64
1841–1845	2,446	1,479	70
1846–1850	2,795	1,389	96
1851–1853	3,355	1,431	87

Source: Harvey 1938: 115

establishment of a regular service of Austrian steamers on the Danube nourished great expectations for turning the river into one of “the most important lines of communication in Europe” or “the natural artery of Europe”. Favoured by this profitable grain trade and endowed with a free port status, the outlets of Brăila and Galați witnessed a rapid upsurge, so as to apparently endanger the leading position of Odessa. The incrimination that Russia was willingly neglecting to take the necessary measures for clearing the Sulina bar and channel of the Danube, the only navigable route towards inland ports, stood at the basis of a diplomatic conflict between Russia and the western cabinets, which was eventually solved after the Crimean War by the establishment of the European Commission of the Danube.

The Anglo-Ottoman convention of August 1838 and similar subsequent agreements concluded between the Porte and most European powers provided a new impetus to trade at Ottoman ports on the western and eastern coast of the Black Sea. The whole of the Ottoman Empire was given a virtually free trade status, and all monopolies were abolished, while low customs rates for the import and export of goods were fixed. The growth of Ottoman trade after 1838 was remarkable, with several goods (among them grain) finding profitable sale to the Mediterranean and Western Europe.

The trade conducted by Bulgarian territories also multiplied after 1838, and Varna became an important commercial outlet of the province. According to a report from the early

Table 6
Grain exports from Odessa and the Danubian ports

Product	Wheat		Maize		Shipping	
	Danube	Odessa	Danube	Odessa	Danube	Odessa
Year	Quantity (1,000 quarters)				Annual average	
1843	430	843	262	0	1,099	745
1844	514	909	302	29	1,384	919
1845	495	1,280	282	21	1,296	1,192
1846	438	1,408	500	26	1,555	1,467
1847	572	2,017	938	27	2,215	1,518
1848	273	1,410	436	3	1,123	1,063
1849	291	1,127	591	31	1,175	878
1850	424	980	273	33	896	783
1851	418	719	997	98	1,668	698
1852	531	1,362	1,055	226	1,756	1,251
Average	439	1,205	564	49	1,417	1,058

Source: Ardeleanu 2014: 271

1840s, it exported about 100,000 quarters of wheat and as much maize to Constantinople, but other agro-pastoral goods of the western Balkans were also pouring in towards this outlet. On the other coast of the Black Sea, similar conditions stimulated the increase of trade. From late 18th century, but especially after the opening of the Straits for international shipping, western merchants started to look for a shorter route towards the Persian market. For a while, considerable trade with Persia was carried by way of Redout Kale, due to the customs privileges granted by the Russian government to the provinces south of the Caucasus. The port was a veritable relay in relation to the inland trading centres of Tiflis and Erevan, wherefrom European merchandise was distributed to Armenia, northern Persia and the eastern Ottoman provinces. However, this commerce, largely controlled by Armenian merchants who used the Leipzig – Odessa route to bring goods to the Black Sea area was greatly affected by Russia's new protectionist policy meant to encourage native manufac-

tures and limit foreign imports.

This stimulated merchants to turn their business to another rapidly growing commercial route from Trabzon to Erzurum and to Tabriz. This southern variant towards Persia was initially used in the early 19th century, but its prospects increased after the signing of the peace of Adrianople and the 1838 convention (Table 7). In 1830, as compared to 1828, Trabzon's exports more than tripled (up to 752,000 rubles), while imports increased almost five-fold (to 5,270,000 rubles). Imports consisted of textiles, colonial goods (sugar and coffee), metal and luxury goods, and exports included shawls from Kashmir, carpets from Persia, gum, and copperware. Along this route, Trabzon became the main gateway for Persian trade, with the biggest part of European merchandise being of British origin. Other ports were also favoured by these agreements, such as Samsun, whose hinterland was more suitable for agriculture, Sinope and Batumi, the centres of the Asia Minor trade.

Table 7
Trade of Trabzon

Year	Imports	Exports
	Value (million of francs)	
1816	12	11
1827	23.2	13.9
1835	38.7	35.0
1841	49.6	49.7
1846	46.0	42.1
1850	71.0	66.5
1852	62.7	53.3

Source: Issawi 1970: 25

CONCLUSIONS

This narrative has told the classical story of a sea gradually attracted into the vortex of world trade. The first episode (1774–1798) in the history of the rediscovery of the Black Sea is remarkable from several perspectives. Firstly, it shows European diplomacy in action, gradually integrating the Black Sea into the international scene and turning the question of the Straits into a significant issue of the continental balance of power. Russia's privileged position in the area was followed by Austria and the Western Powers requesting similar advantages from the Porte so as to avoid the imposition of a renewed hegemony over the Euxine. Secondly, it proves how important strategic commodities such as naval stores had become in the political and commercial contest of the great maritime powers. Trying to secure reliable connections with a promising market, European cabinets hurried to conclude trade and navigation agreements with Russia, the new actor of the southern Mediterranean commercial route. Thirdly, at a micro level, it shows how merchants along this route ventured into the Black Sea and widened the breach in the jealously guarded status of the Turkish Straits. However, during this early phase the trading infrastructure of the Black Sea area was too weak to allow for continuous and secure trading relations. The Ottomans were still reluctant to completely open the Bosphorus to international shipping and mercantile fluxes remained insecure, resisting only with the support of the governmental privileges meant to encourage the development of trade.

The second phase (1798–1829) brought about a completely different situation, with passage rights through the Straits traded by the Porte in exchange for political advantages.

But with a continuous war raging on the continent, it was not a good period to cash in on the advantages of the new right obtained by the western merchants and ship-owners. Military conflicts and the disruption of normal agricultural production cycles increased the demand for grain, and the Black Sea area was destined to supply it, due to the abundance of black earth on its northern and western coasts and its favourable climate. During the 19th century, an exponential expansion of cultivated lands, accompanied by the amelioration of agricultural techniques, the use of higher quality seeds and of modern machines resulted in a significant quantitative and qualitative increase of the agricultural output. Moreover, local and central authorities were interested in encouraging agriculture, as trading agro-pastoral goods was Russia's main source of prosperity, and hence the interest in developing the string of ports along the Black Sea northern coast, with Odessa their new queen. But as continuous political problems hindered the growth of this trade, Russia had to force the complete opening of the Black Sea, a provision included in the Treaty of Adrianople.

After 1829 the economic structure of New Russia adapted to feed this grain frenzy. Nourished by the grain trade, the area gradually emerged from the periphery of the economic world market. Ottoman territories gradually followed in the footsteps of this commercial revolution. In Moldavia and Wallachia, the Treaty of Adrianople abolished all former obligations to supply the Porte with grain and other commodities, and Danubian products could be sold freely, according to free market rules. In the next decades, the two states imposed a coherent policy meant to favour production and encourage foreign trade by means of a low tariff, and Danubian grain

started to compete against the Russian cereals. In 1838, when the whole of the Ottoman Empire was granted a virtually free trade status, all provinces bordering the Black Sea were quickly integrated into the rhythms of world trade. In less than three quarters of a century, the Black Sea trade was transformed beyond recognition, making the area one of the most dynamic commercial areas of the world.

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