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CONSTANTIN ARDELEANU
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RĂZVAN VONCU

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



CONSTANTIN ARDELEANU

Born in 1976, in Galați

Ph.D. in modern history, “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute, Bucharest, 2006

Thesis: *British economic and political interests at the Lower Danube (1856–1918)*

Associate Professor in modern history, the “Lower Danube” University of Galați, Faculty of History, Philosophy and Theology

Postdoctoral fellowship, “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute, Bucharest (2010–2012)

Papers presented at international conferences and symposia in Great Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Turkey, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova

Published papers in modern and contemporary history, maritime history, economic history, Romanian–British relations, local history

Member in research projects in institutional history (“Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași, “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute, Bucharest), maritime history (Ionian University, Greece, International Institute of Social History, the Netherlands), coordinator of research team in maritime economic history (funded by the Romanian National Research Council)

Books:

Gurile Dunării – o problemă europeană. Comerț și navigație la Dunărea de Jos în surse contemporane (1829-1853), Editura Istros – Muzeul Brăilei, Brăila, 2008

Evoluția intereselor economice și politice britanice la gurile Dunării (1829-1914), Editura Istros – Muzeul Brăilei, Brăila, 2008

THE DISCOVERY OF THE BLACK SEA BY THE WESTERN WORLD: THE OPENING OF THE EUXINE TO INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND SHIPPING (1774–1792)

I. Introduction

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent conquest of all trading centers along the Black Sea coasts, the Ottoman Empire imposed an almost complete prohibition of foreign shipping in what became, by the annexation of Southern Bessarabia or the Budjak in 1538, a Turkish lake. 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 Turkish capital.

During the following three centuries, the Mediterranean and Western maritime powers attempted to get direct access to these cheap resources, but their requests to have the Black Sea opened to international navigation fell on deaf ears. Thus, passage right 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. However, this closure was not completely hermetic, as the Ottoman authorities preferred to preserve the commercial and fiscal benefits of the Black Sea international trade when this did not impair their superior economic and political interests.

The Porte followed, throughout this period, clear procedures for the admission of ships into the Black Sea. Vessels carrying products under governmental orders enjoyed special privileges and were given priority in relation to ships chartered by private merchants. The former boats displayed special signs and were included on a list forwarded to the

customs officer stationed at the Bosphorus Strait (in 1755, for example, 120 ships were allowed to bring grain from different ports of the Black Sea). Merchants trading in the area had to fill in papers with information about the ports of shipment, tonnage of ships, type and quantity of cargo, their guarantor in the imperial capital. After the request was sanctioned, they were given a firman addressed to the officials from the ports of shipment; the tradesmen's papers were endorsed there, and the entrepreneurs were provided with documents addressed to the Porte's customs and naval authorities, allowing them to return to Istanbul.¹

Shipping in the Black Sea was thus confined to vessels under Turkish flag, and Istanbul played the role of a veritable staple port in relation to the territories beyond the Bosphorus. As a consequence of this navigation monopoly, the Euxine remained completely peripheral to those economic developments that were shaping, since late 15th century, the modern world-system. 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 Turkish seafarers settled in Istanbul or in the commercial emporia scattered around the Pontos, completely, irreversibly and rapidly changed after 1774. It took this breach in the jealously guarded status of the Turkish Straits to feed a veritable revolution in European interest for the Black Sea.² 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 an economic heritage not least impressive – a fresh route eastwards, with ramifications towards the Balkans, Central Europe, Poland, Russia, the Caucasus, Persia. The golden wool of the Argonauts had now more palpable shapes: naval stores, grain and agro-pastoral goods.

In the following two decades, the prospects of the Black Sea were debated not only in the great port-cities around the Mediterranean, in Marseilles, Venice, Trieste or Leghorn, but also in most European capitals, in Vienna and Paris, London and Naples, not to mention St. Petersburg and Istanbul. Throughout the continent, in political and diplomatic offices as well as in traders' storehouses, the opening of a new market was received with natural inquisitiveness.

The present paper aims to reconstruct this puzzle, whose pieces are now extremely loose, lost in historical narratives analyzing the political or economic involvement of different European powers in the Black Sea area. It covers a short period (1774–1792), dominated by political fluidity in the

area, in which Russia managed to implant herself on the northern Black Sea coast and to gradually take control over the strategic Crimean Peninsula. However, the relatively stable decade between the two Russo–Turkish wars waged during Catherine II’s reign allowed remarkable commercial developments. The classical story of a restricted and regional trade caught in the vortex of the great global commercial exchanges is now clearly visible. 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 society itself. This first phase of economic promoters and commercial pioneers shows a Black Sea in complete and quick transformation, abruptly stopped when the entire continent got embroiled into the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. For two decades, trade lost its independence and had to serve the needs of combatant forces.

This approach aims to present the official developments and reactions in European countries following the opening of the Euxine in 1774, insisting on the diversity and rapidity of action at a continental scale rather than detailing the inner organization of trade. This choice was also dictated by the fact that in this early and necessarily chaotic phase (in the sense of lacking a clear organization), trade patterns were still unsettled, irregular and hazardous, confined more to intrepid speculators than to the meticulous and prudent mercantile networks of the 19th century.

II. Russia’s march towards warm seas

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 finally reached this goal when Peter the Great conquered the fortress of Azov (1696) and secured free navigation in that sea, the antechamber of the Black Sea proper.³ A quarter century after Peter’s disastrous campaign on the Pruth (1711), the Tsarist Empire resumed its march southwards. In 1736, the strategic strongholds of Azov and Ochakiv, at the mouth of the Dnieper, were regained, but unfavorable military developments prevented the execution of an ambitious expansionistic program.⁴ By the Peace of Belgrade and the Convention of Nissa (1739) Russia retained Azov, but had to dismantle its fortifications; the navigation of Russian

commercial ships was permitted in the Sea of Azov, although they were still not allowed in the Black Sea.⁵

Another quarter-century later, the able Catherine II followed in the footsteps of her predecessors, conscious that Russia's future as a European power greatly depended on getting a firm hold, military and economically, of the Black Sea. In order to achieve this, the Empress had to impose her control in two buffer areas that stood in Russia's way: Poland and the Crimean Khanate. During this period, a part of Ukraine east of the Dnieper and the steppe lands north of the Crimea were incorporated by Russia, whereas the Polish crisis of 1763–1768 enabled ample tsarist interventions in Warsaw's affairs. The outburst of a new Russo–Turkish war in 1768, emanated from these political developments, served perfectly the designs of Catherine's foreign policy and secured Russia's crucial step towards the Black Sea.⁶

The military actions of the war are of little significance for this narrative, although it should be mentioned that the Russian fleet played a major part in securing a smashing victory. By the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed on 21 July 1774, Russia gained a strategic foothold on the northern Black Sea coast, annexing the Kuban and Terek areas (formerly belonging to the Crimean Khanate), 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. In the same time, the formal independence of the weak Crimean Khanate equaled the establishment of a satellite state, not of a veritable buffer zone between Russia and Turkey. But the greatest success of tsarist diplomacy was the right granted to Russian ships to sail on the Black Sea and pass through the Straits, a provision with momentous political and economic consequences for the entire area.⁷

Adding numerous other privileges which Russia acquired in relation to the Porte, the treaty completely reset the balance of power in the Near East. With the tsars well implanted in the Black Sea and capable to build and equip a strong navy, Istanbul was under continuous and direct threat. The complicated European diplomatic situation did not allow any intervention to support Turkey, which, on the contrary, was assaulted with demands from France, Britain, the Dutch Republic and Venice, all requiring passage right into the Black Sea.⁸ The only solution to belittle

Russia's victory seemed to completely crush down the Porte's resistance in allowing free international shipping beyond the Bosphorus Strait.

During the next decade, Crimea was the scene of a fresh trial of strength between the two imperial rivals, each trying to impose a dependable khan. On 21 March 1779, Russia and Turkey signed the Convention of Ainali Kavak, a reiteration of existing treaties, by which the Porte recognized Schahin Guerai, Russia's candidate, as khan, but re-confirmed the political independence of the Tartars; at the same time, the lands between the rivers Bug and Dniester, formerly part of the Khanate, were to fall under Turkish control, although most of the region remained uninhabited, as a buffer zone between the Ottoman Empire, Russia and the dominions of the khan. Nevertheless, as political unrest continued in the Crimea, the idea of annexing the Khanate gained preponderance among Russian leading circles, and in April 1783 Empress Catherine II issued a manifesto proclaiming the annexation of the Crimea, the Kuban and the Taman peninsula. A new Russo–Turkish war seemed imminent, but without consistent European diplomatic support the Porte had to refrain from intervening militarily.⁹

War did break out in 1787, and Austria joined it in February 1788, following the Christian empires' plans of partitioning the Ottoman territories. The conflict had noticeable military developments in the Caucasus and the Baltic areas, arousing to action the torpid European diplomacy. Hostilities ended with the Austro–Turkish treaty of Sistova (4 August 1791), which granted to the Habsburgs the Danubian key position of Old Orșova and the area around it in the Banat, north of the Iron Gates. The treaty of Jassy (9 January 1792) confirmed all existing agreements between Turkey and Russia (thus the latter's possession of the Crimea), gave Ochakiv to Russia and made the Porte responsible for pacifying the area south of the Kuban River.¹⁰

In less than two decades, Russia secured herself control over the entire northern coast of the Euxine, a territorial progress 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 route–ways required the imposition of several administrative, economic and social reforms.

III. The economic organization of “New Russia” – its integration into the Empire and linkage to commercial route–ways

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 establishment. Several administrative reforms organized the territory of New Russia, culminating with the foundation of the Ekaterinoslav Viceroyalty in 1784, a territory ruled, throughout this period, by the almighty imperial favorite, Prince Gregory Potemkin.¹¹ Large estates were donated to the nobiliary elite, and ample colonization 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 population of the territories making up the Viceroyalty increased, during these decades, from about 263,000 to almost 820,000 inhabitants.¹²

These measures profoundly transformed the internal economic structure of New Russia, gradually providing to the markets a greater surplus of agricultural goods,¹³ 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, the imperial authorities followed a coherent policy of constructing an entire trading infrastructure. The creation of a string of commercial emporia along the northern Black Sea coast provided the area with veritable economic lungs, capable to adapt the area to the atmosphere of a capitalist economy. In the Sea of Azov, the port of Taganrog, strategically placed close to the mouth of the Don River, was rebuilt in 1769 and shortly became the centre of considerable trade and shipping. Population increased from a few hundred inhabitants in 1774 to about 6,000 in 1793. About 60 ships called at Taganrog annually, and trade increased to more than half a million rubles yearly. Mariupol, founded by Greek settlers coming 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.¹⁴

As promising was the Dnieper region, whose prospects increased after the foundation of Kherson, in 1778, as a commercial and naval port, the intended “St. Petersburg of the South.” Greatly supported by local and central authorities, it slowly became “a concourse of strangers and a considerable commerce,”¹⁵ the most important gate binding the

European maritime routes to the continental roads leading deep into Russia and Poland.¹⁶

After the acquisition of the Crimea, Sevastopol was established on the site of a natural harbor and became the operational basis of Russia's Black Sea navy. It also developed an export trade of about 500,000 rubles a year and imported merchandise amounting to about half as much. Theodosia, the prosperous medieval Caffa, was reestablished, but, similarly to all Crimean outlets, it suffered due to its bad connections with the rest of the Empire.¹⁷

In 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 the reduction by 25 % 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.¹⁸

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 1785.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Another agreement, with Portugal, referred to mutual reduction of duties by one half when several listed goods were imported directly.²²

Not least of all, the decisive part in developing Black Sea trade belonged to the agreements concluded between Russia and the Porte. The trade convention of 1783 stipulated that only Russian commercial ships with a capacity of maximum 16,000 kile (25 tons) could cross the Bosphorus Strait.²³ However, it was rather difficult for Russian ships to enter and trade independently in the Black Sea. Disputes about cargo remained an obstacle for the passage of ships through the Bosphorus, as allegedly goods were allowed to be shipped by Russia to other countries only if they were not needed on Ottoman markets. According to Turkish

sources, a total of 445 Russian ships passed through the Istanbul Strait into the Black Sea between 1774 and 1787, or a total of about 30 ships a year.²⁴

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 of a smaller squadron stationed at Kherson. The power of these warships was proven 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 and the citadel fell, a similar fate as all major Ottoman strongholds in the area (Akkerman and Bender on the Dniester, Kilia and Ismail on the Danube), a great contribution belonging to the navy in Sevastopol.²⁵ 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.²⁶

IV. France and the Black Sea trade – the southern pathway to Russia

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 commerce with Russia was dominated by English, Dutch and Hanseatic traders. The first direct French interests in the Euxine were related to the Crimean Khanate; barrier against Russian interferences in the Ottoman Empire, the Khanate was, despite its political weakness, an indispensable actor for the regional balance of power. In the same time, regarded economically, it was a valuable relay between the rich resources of the Russian provinces and the Constantinopolitan and Mediterranean markets. France was therefore greatly interested to implant herself in the Crimea.

Her presence became effective in the 18th century, when a consulate was established at Bahçeyserai. Since 1740 French merchants received the right to trade in the Black Sea on Ottoman ships, a privilege also granted to Russia, but the customs and naval controls at the Bosphorus made exchanges difficult. The outbreak of war in 1768 put an end to this consular agency, consequently with a direct Marseilles commercial venture in the area: the entrepot at Caffa, dependent on the Sultan, founded in 1768 by several merchants from the Mediterranean outlet. The conflict completely changed France's attitude regarding the Black Sea. On the one side the diplomats in Versailles tried to support Turkey and preserve the privileges

French traders enjoyed on the Ottoman markets; on the other side, they wanted to benefit from the advantages resulting from a predictable Russian triumph. Thus, shortly after the entry of a Russian ship into the Black Sea in December 1774, Ambassador Saint-Priest in Constantinople quickly demanded the same privilege for French commercial vessels.²⁷

As Russia's control over the northern Black Sea coast strengthened in the following decades, French diplomacy turned to St. Petersburg, aiming to open a direct commercial route between Marseilles and New Russia. In the same time, mercantile circles in southern French ports were as interested to encourage trade relations 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. At a time when disruptions of supplies with naval stores were frequent on the northern route, the interest for procuring these goods via the Black Sea increased rapidly. Kherson was favorably placed, as it could ship a large variety of goods, including cheap timber and hemp from the Ukraine; thus, in May or June 1780, a commercial ship hoisting the Russian flag headed to Toulon with a cargo of salted beef, but also with the high hopes of the traders from both ends of this fresh commercial route.²⁸

The local and central authorities in the two countries supported these initiatives. Potemkin was closely interested to develop New Russia's commerce and one of his agents, Mikhail Faleev, founded a "Company of the Black Sea" for trading with the Ottoman Empire and France.²⁹ He signed contracts for delivering to Marseilles different goods, among which tobacco, iron, canvas, ropes and salted meat. However, although the products imported from Russia's ports enjoyed privileged customs duties, the profitability of these early shipments was considered unsatisfactory.³⁰

A new phase in French commercial involvement in the Black Sea was inaugurated by the activity of an enterprising merchant, Antoine Anthoine, 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 several Frenchmen were "already established as barbers, shoemakers, watchmakers, tailors."³¹ In St. Petersburg he presented Potemkin a list of compulsory improvements for developing the international trade of Kherson: to conclude commercial agreements with the Porte for securing commercial safety; to grant privileges to foreign

merchants (allowing them to use the Russian flag and to trade within Russia), including fiscal and customs exemptions; to connect the port to the Russian and Polish postal services and to accept the nomination of a French consul.³² Anthoine was granted the privileges requested, so that in July 1782 he established in Kherson, together with his brother Louis and his partner Sauron, the trading house called *Anthoine frères, Sauron et Companie*.³³

Anthoine visited Poland, where his commercial overtures proved fruitful, as the authorities in Warsaw were also trying to reroute their exports towards the Black Sea. Thanks to his mediation, Polish and Russian officials agreed to cooperate and turn Kherson into the commercial gate of a larger region, related to the markets of Russia, Poland, Austria, the Danubian Principalities and the Mediterranean Sea. Back in France, Anthoine convinced his fellow statesmen that he could supply the French Admiralty with Polish timber, allegedly superior to anything available in the Baltic Sea. Well received at Versailles, he secured significant privileges for supplying the arsenal in Toulon, so that since 1784 he invested his capitals in this trade, his ships entering the Black Sea under Russian colors.

Quantitative data relating to these exchanges is rather inconsistent. According to French sources, the number of ships sailing from the Black Sea to Marseilles was as follows: 1782 – 2, 1784 – 4, 1785 – 9, 1786 – 17, 1787 – 25. As for French ships heading to Kherson, the numbers were: 1784 – 4, 1785 – 4, 1786 – 20, 1787 – 18. 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.)³⁴ Ships usually loaded at Marseilles alcoholic beverages (wine), textiles (Lyon fabrics, velvet, fine linen) and colonial goods and returned laden with hemp, wax, honey; but the most traded product became wheat, well received on the Mediterranean markets.³⁵

However, despite its growing tendency, this trade proved disappointing for the French authorities. The savings, compared to the imports from the Baltic were estimated at 12%, although Anthoine promised as much as 37%. Moreover, the versatile merchant became more interested in lucrative speculations with wheat for his own account, and less eager to provide good shipments for the Admiralty. The quality of his supplies was rather low, as producers were not convinced to redirect their best merchandise towards the still unsettled southern route. The trade of the Black Sea hardly fulfilled the high hopes placed in it, and the new

military conflict started in 1787 represented a new complication for the international trade of Kherson, already affected by its very unhealthy position in the delta of the Dniester River.³⁶

V. Austria and the Black Sea – the employment of the Danubian route

Starting with the late 17th century, Austria accelerated her march towards the Black Sea. This progress was favored by the Peace of Passarowitz (1718), which gave her, besides significant territorial acquisitions, the right to trade at the Lower Danube and in the Black Sea by means of Ottoman ships. The Peace of Belgrade (1739) extended these provisions, and Austrian merchants were granted the privilege to navigate on the Danube down to its mouths and to cross the Turkish possessions aboard their own means of transport. However, such stipulations remained a dead letter due to several conditions, 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, an agent of the commercial company founded by Count Rüdiger von Starhemberg, who attempted to trade directly with Tartary and the Crimea when French merchants were also sounding the area. Kleeman left for the Lower Danube in October 1768 and crossed the Iron Gates in early November. He changed his vessels in the Turkish port of Rusciuk (Ruse) and, after descending the Chilia (Kilia) branch of the river, headed for the khan's residence in the Crimea and then to Constantinople. Although the tradesman had many mishaps, his manufactures (ironware, gallantry, cotton textiles and general wares) were sold with a huge profit – 87 ³/₄ %, proving the high productivity of developing this Danubian commercial route. Returned to Vienna, Kleeman advised, in memoranda sent to the imperial court, the organization of the Austrian trade towards the Levant, the Crimea and Little Tartary.³⁷

The shipping privilege granted to Russia in 1774 nourished similar hopes in Austria. In January 1775 Chancellor Kaunitz instructed Ambassador von Thugut in Constantinople to obtain from the Porte the right for Habsburg subjects to navigate at the mouths of the Danube and in the Black Sea. However, such thing was still little practicable, as the imperials had few information on navigational conditions beyond the Iron Gates.³⁸ It thus became a priority of the Viennese authorities to collect

details on the geographical, military and economic conditions of the Danubian Principalities and of the Black Sea littoral.

A favorable circumstance to map the Lower Danube came in 1779, when the new internuncio, Herbert von Rathkeal, proceeded to his post via the Danube. A topographical engineer, Captain Georg Lauterer, was appointed chief of his naval escort, but Lauterer's main mission was to chart the river section downstream of the Iron Gates. Experienced in piloting fluvial ships, the officer drew the first relatively accurate Austrian map of the Lower Danube (down to Ruse), but he also referred to fluvial shipping, port facilities and the general trading conditions of the area.³⁹

The increasing commerce of the Black Sea was also closely scrutinized by investors 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 favorably 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. Joseph offered an imperial ship, mastered by Captain Lauterer (instructed with additional cartographical tasks), to convey down the Danube Austrian goods valued at about 25,000 florins (textiles, porcelain, glassware, mirrors, fashion goods, metal works and common wares). More cargo (mainly wine) was loaded in Hungary on another vessel, so that the expedition carried along the Danube about 700 tons of goods. The party left Vienna on 11 June 1782 and reached the Danubian port of Galați, on the maritime section of the Danube (i.e. accessible to sea-going ships) in late July. The goods were transhipped here, according to the final destination of the merchandise, most of it aboard a Russian vessel, "St. Catherine," bound for Kherson. Lauterer continued his military mission, mapping the last unknown section of the Danube and the north-western coast of the Black Sea, with valuable information on local trade and shipping.⁴⁰

Willehoffen organized a second expedition in 1783, led by the same Lauterer, now accompanied by two assistants, captains Karl Dominik Redange von Titelsberg and Frank Mihanovici. They left Vienna in April and in late May 1783 reached Galați, whence the three military agents parted ways. Lauterer left for Constantinople, Mihanovici surveyed the Danubian outlets of Galați and Brăila and then headed to the Bosphorus by crossing and mapping the southern (St. George) branch of the Danube, whereas Redange headed to the northern Black Sea area via the northern

(Kilia) branch of the river. They all provided valuable details on trade and shipping on the maritime Danube and the Black Sea, further encouraging official Austrian investments in the area. As for Willeshoffen, he proved a mere speculator and went bankrupt in 1784, to the dismay of Emperor Joseph II and of the other investors.⁴¹

However, more commercial ventures followed soon enough. In 1783 the Austrian officer Johhannes Haribert, Baron von Tauferer traded timber brought from the Danube. His enterprise was successful, and the enterpriser settled himself at Constantinople, where he conducted lucrative business for about three years, but he also went bankrupt in 1787.⁴²

The diplomatic support for developing this trade led to the conclusion, on 24 February 1784, of a commercial agreement between Austria and the Ottoman Empire. The convention regulated the imports of Austrian wares 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%, and Austrian shipping into the Black Sea, through the Straits, was also allowed.⁴³ A treaty of commerce between Austria and Russia was concluded in 1785, by which the imperials were granted reduced export rates for Hungarian wines and advantages for trading with the ports of Sevastopol, Kherson and Theodosia.⁴⁴

Several other mercantile initiatives followed until the outbreak of the new war (the *Donau und Seehandlungscmpagnie* founded in Vienna by Karl and Friedrich Bargum, the commercial house established in Galați by Count Festetics and the Transylvanian merchant Johann Gottfried Bozenhard, the companies of Christof Skivro of Semlin and of Demeter Tullio of Pest, the initiative of Valentin and Joseph Ignatz Göllner of Karlstadt, the Viennese company of Domenico Dellazia, etc.⁴⁵), but all suffered from the same problem – the passage of the Iron Gates was not only perilous in itself, but it was also financially burdening.

The commercial treaty of 1784 opened another direct route of Austrian initiative in the Black Sea, encouraging entrepreneurs in Trieste to trade in the area. One of the most active merchants was Jovo Kurtović, interested in commercial ventures in Russian ports, but also in Sulina and Galați.⁴⁶ However, the outbreak of war in 1787 and Austria's involvement in the conflict in 1788 put a quick end to these drives.

VI. The Danubian Principalities and their restricted trade under the Turkish suzerainty

Besides the products supplied by Russian ports, in the last quarter of the 18th century foreign merchants became as interested in the commercial resources of the Danubian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, autonomous states under Turkish domination. At an economic level, one of the most obstructive elements of the Turkish suzerainty was the Porte's "relative" monopoly over the two Principalities' foreign trade, meaning a limitation of their ability to trade their products freely, at market prices. Wallachia and Moldavia were compelled to supply large quantities of grain (mainly wheat and barley), livestock (sheep), animal fat, butter, pressed cheese, honey, wax, timber, salt-peter, etc. for the needs of the Ottoman army, of the Turkish Danubian strongholds and of the Constantinopolitan market, 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 (1774, 1783, 1791, etc.) restricted the Porte's economic 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.⁴⁷

Despite these critical drawbacks, the political background of the Eastern Question and the broader diplomatic and cultural contacts with the West favoured the growth of the European interest for the economic possibilities of the Romanian Principalities, which could provide cheap and qualitative raw materials and serve as a convenient market for manufactured goods. The establishment of foreign consulates in the capitals of Bucharest and Jassy (Russia – 1782, Austria – 1783) was both the consequence of this increased relevancy of Wallachia and Moldavia on the international scene, and the cause for a further awareness of the commercial opportunities of the Lower Danubian area. Diplomacy and trade went hand in hand, and the prospects of a commercial expansion towards the Black Sea drew the attention of Austrian statesmen, just as the same relative opening of the Black Sea to European trade and navigation encouraged western diplomats to survey the economic opportunities of the Euxine and its adjacent provinces.

The establishment of consulates had considerable effects on the Principalities' trade, as the foreign merchants benefited from the advantages granted by their countries' capitulations with the Porte; entrusted with consular protection, these tradesmen were secured against

the abuses of Ottoman or Romanian military and civil servants. Enjoying such juridical and fiscal profits, the quality of “sudit” (foreign subject) became a precious privilege for domestic merchants as well, who sought and bought the respected and profitable Austrian or Russian protection. Besides the restrictive trade in the products requisitioned by the Porte, Moldavia and Wallachia were also engaged, in the last quarter of the 18th century, 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, as the modernization and westernization of the Romanian society enhanced the demand of these products.⁴⁸ When Istanbul was abundantly supplied, as in was the case in 1775, the export of wheat was freely allowed for the Principalities.⁴⁹

VII. Poland and the Black Sea – escaping commercial isolation

Another state greatly interested in the increasing prospects of the Black Sea trade was Poland, whose difficult political constellation was doubled by a deep economic crisis. The First Partition of Poland in 1772 was a great economic blow to the Kingdom’s commercial interests, as Pomerania, without Gdańsk (Danzig) on the Baltic coast and Toruń (Thorn) on the Vistula River, was annexed by Prussia. Gdańsk was virtually cut off from Poland, whose access to the sea was hindered by the exorbitant customs fees imposed upon Polish goods exported via its Baltic outlet.⁵⁰ Suffocated by this barrier, Poland and Prussia signed a commercial treaty in 1775 which, nevertheless, established huge taxes for Polish goods transited to Gdańsk (12 %) or sold to the Prussian industry (30 %). A fast consequence of this policy was a marked decrease in Poland’s trade with Gdańsk by way of the Vistula River, with less than half of the number of barges and boats recorded on the river in 1776 as compared to pre-partition times.⁵¹

Faced with an acute economic crisis, the authorities in Warsaw attempted to redirect the country’s trade towards the Black Sea, and in November 1776 the diplomat Boscamp–Lasopolski was sent to Constantinople to promote Polish trade in the Euxine. The network of internal rivers (the Dniester, the Dnieper and the Bug) could be profitably used to ship Polish goods to Russian or Turkish ports, the same routes

being 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.⁵²

In 1782 Prince Michael Poniatowski and Chancellor Antoni Onufry Okecki founded in Warsaw a "Polish Company for Oriental Trade," directed by Prot Potocki, whose entrepreneurial spirit greatly contributed to the success of this commercial initiative.⁵³ In the same time, during his Polish visit, Anthoine promoted the development of trade between France and Poland, which could be encouraged by a reduction of customs duties in the Kingdom's south-eastern territories. Anthoine supported the choice of Kherson as the intermediate port and even concluded a contract with the Polish Company for delivering local goods, amounting to 100,000 francs, to Marseilles.⁵⁴ The Russian authorities also encouraged this trade and Catherine's 1782 ukase accepted Polish goods to enter Kherson without paying customs taxes. Antoine Zablocki was appointed consul, and in 1783 the Polish Company was allowed to build its own warehouses and have an office in Russia's growing outlet.⁵⁵ In the same time, Russia allowed a Polish agent to purchase and use a ship, named "Saint Michel," under Russian colors.

The economic development of Poland's south-eastern provinces was greatly encouraged by the central and regional authorities, which invested in the modernization of land routes and inland waterways capable to carry bulky goods to the Black Sea outlets. By a decision of the Sejm in 1784, import duties on goods entering the southern provinces were reduced to 4 %, and export duties to 1 % *ad valorem*. Russia granted further privileges to the Polish merchants involved in the Black Sea trade. Polish goods were allowed free transit through New Russia, a reduction of 25 % in customs duties was applied to Polish exports to Russia, and the import of goods destined for Poland enjoyed further fiscal benefits. Naturally enough, several Polish entrepreneurs, such as the banker Tepper of Warsaw, founded commercial houses in the Russian port.⁵⁶

The Frenchmen were extremely interested in the raw materials provided by the Polish markets, well advertized by the consular agent in Warsaw, Bonneau. There was an abundance of agro-pastoral goods, although the strategic commodity was timber for masts. Shipments of mast logs were sent via Kherson to the shipyards in Toulon,⁵⁷ although the cargoes proved to be of low quality.

In 1785 Gaétan Chrzanowski was appointed Polish agent in the Turkish capital, entrusted with the special mission to expand the economic exchanges with the Ottoman market and negotiate the granting of passage through the Straits for Polish vessels. Although the request was duly rejected by the Turks, the Polish Company already owned a small fleet of ships which used the Russian flag for entering the Black Sea.

During the peaceful interval of 1784–1787, export from Poland through Kherson increased exponentially. The Dniester was a favorite waterway for shipping goods from Podolia, a route well popularized by large landowners such as the Prince of Nassau or Walery Dzieduszycki. Other rivers (the Pripet, the Slucz, the Horyn and the Berezina) were as important for supplying timber from the rich inland forests.⁵⁸

Wheat also became profitable merchandise for Polish landlords, being well requested on the Mediterranean ports, at Alexandria, Marseille or Barcelona. In 1785, for example, the wheat sent from Poland to Kherson amounted to 3 million Zlotys, or 60% of the 4,900,780 Zlotys that represented the port's trade.⁵⁹

New privileges were discussed between Russia and Poland in 1787, proving Russia's double attitude regarding the development of Polish exports. In the early phase of these exchanges, the Russian ambassador in Warsaw, Count von Stackelberg, encouraged them and insisted on privileges being granted for Poland's foreign trade through Kherson. But Russia was not desirous of increasing the commerce of the products which she could also supply. In the same time she aimed to prevent the direct contact between Polish and foreign merchants involved in the Black Sea trade. Similar intentions were displayed by Prussia, discontented by the shift in the direction of Polish exports.⁶⁰

Thus, the Russians worked to frustrate initiatives such as that promoted by a French merchant, Hugon, who advised for direct trade between Polish and French merchants. Hugon settled himself in Podolia, on the coast of the Dniester, and sent to Warsaw several memoranda recommending the use of that river and the building of commercial entrepôts in Ochakiv, Akkerman and Kiliajnova or of carrying goods by boat further to Kherson. This second route was supported by Chrzanowski, and the river was explored for navigability and charted.⁶¹

However, the employment of the Dniester depended on the Ottoman authorities which controlled the lower section of the river and refused to allow the transit of Polish goods without paying rather large customs duties. A Polish consul was appointed at Akkerman,⁶² and the authorities

in Warsaw understood the need of concluding a commercial treaty with the Porte. In 1792, when a Polish envoy, Piotr Potocki, was sent to Constantinople to discuss such an agreement, the political situation in Poland had already become critical; the war between Poland and Russia and the subsequent Second Partition of Poland made this mission fruitless.⁶³ It was the end of the flourishing Polish trade through the Black Sea, followed by economic ruin and the bankruptcy of several businesses and banking firms.

VIII. The Italian states and the Black Sea – on the footsteps of medieval trade

Geography placed the Italian states in a good position to benefit from the opening of the Black Sea to international shipping. The merchants in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were very interested to conclude a commercial agreement with Russia, the trade between the two countries being negligible before this moment; in 1784, for example, only one Russian ship got to Naples with a cargo of iron and pitch.⁶⁴ After long negotiations, a commercial agreement was concluded on 17 January 1787, valid for 12 years and including all advantages and customs exemptions granted by Russia to her friendly nations. Vincenzo Musenga was appointed Neapolitan consul in Kherson, but the outbreak of war did not allow the development of trade for the period analyzed in this paper.⁶⁵

The Venetian Republic was even better placed in relation to the Black Sea due to the large fleet it had in the Eastern Mediterranean and the skill of her 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 in this growing trade.⁶⁶ Besides shipping, Venetian traders were as interested in gaining direct access to the resources of the area, grain and agro-pastoral goods, and to exporting here the common wares of the Mediterranean markets.

IX. Britain and the Black Sea – from political and commercial interest

British involvement in the Black Sea had more to do with political than with commercial reasons, being included in the great colonial rivalry against France. After Russia received passage right through the Bosphorus, the Foreign Office required the British Ambassador to Constantinople, John Murray, to insist at the Porte for allowing the traffic of British ships into the Black Sea, a request duly rejected by the Porte.⁶⁷

The French interest for the Russian route was noticed by the new British ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Robert Ainslie (1776–1794), who reported to the Foreign Office, in 1782, about the acquisition of naval supplies (masts and timber) at Kherson by French traders.⁶⁸ Ainslie sent a British merchant, David Gray, to explore the commercial opportunities of the Balkans and of the Black Sea coasts, and the tradesman gave a favorable account on products such as oak available in the Balkans or Crimean tobacco. Other information on the profitability of this new route came from British subjects employed in Russia's service.⁶⁹ However, direct British participation in this commerce was still absent.

Political developments made English statesmen pay more attention to the new conflict which started in the Near East in 1787. Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger was overtly hostile to Russia keeping the fortress of Ochakiv, captured from the Turks in 1788. Believed to command the estuaries of two rivers (Bug and Dniester), this last Ottoman stronghold on the northern shore of the Black Sea was also regarded as capable of blocking Polish trade down these waterways and of allowing France to draw large naval supplies from the mainland. Not least of all, the fortress strengthened Russia's position in the Black Sea and increased her ability to threaten the tottering Ottoman Empire and endanger British interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁷⁰

The crisis determined the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, to start gathering reliable information on the Balkans and the Black Sea. George Frederick Koehler, a young artillery officer, reported on the state of Turkish fortifications in the area,⁷¹ whereas William Sidney Smith from the Royal Navy gave accounts on the state of the Turkish fleet, the ports and arsenals of the Euxine.⁷² Trade was not absent in these reports, as the resources of the Black Sea seemed extremely remunerating. Thus, Grenville also required Smith information "respecting the commercial state of the several countries bordering the Black Sea; the means by which the inhabitants are

supplied with the various articles of their consumption, the productions which they supply in return; and the mode of transportation by which such intercourse is carried on," with a view of sounding a future expansion of British trade and navigation in that part of the world.⁷³

As important was the report drafted in 1791 by William Lindsay, secretary of the British Embassy to St. Petersburg. He drew up a detailed description of the Black Sea area, with particularities concerning navigation, the geographical position of ports, export goods and trade prospects for English merchants.⁷⁴ The British Government also requested a report regarding the perspectives of trading in the Euxine from the Private Council of Trade, which only provided general information,⁷⁵ mainly taken from the classical narrative of the former French consul to Bahçeyserai, Peyssonnel.⁷⁶

X. Conclusions

This short episode in the history 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 Black Sea 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-way. 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 continuous and secure trading relations. The Turks were still reluctant to completely open the Bosphorus to international shipping and mercantile fluxes remained insecure, resisting with the support of the governmental privileges meant to encourage the development of trade. It took three more decades and a peaceful period to fully integrate this area into the vortex of the capitalist world-system.

NOTES

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- 2 References to a commercial revolution were already made in the instructions given in 1784 to Auguste de Choiseul–Gouffier, the French ambassador to Constantinople, as quoted by Robert Mantran, *Commerce maritime et économie dans l'Empire Ottoman au XVIII^e siècle*, in the vol. *Économie et sociétés dans l'Empire Ottoman (Fin du XVIII^e – Début du XX^e siècle). Actes du colloque de Strasbourg (1^{er} – 5 juillet 1980)*, edited by Jean–Louis Bacqué–Grammont et Paul Dumont, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1983, 293; "Many speculations have been entertained concerning the extent and value of the traffick which Russia is likely to establish in the Black Sea, and the revolution which it may effect in the commerce of Europe, by transferring part of the Baltick trade to the ports of the Mediterranean" – William Coxe, *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark, interspersed with historical relations and political inquiries*, second edition, vol. II, T. Cadell, London, 1785, 248.
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- 4 John P. LeDonne, "Geopolitics, logistics, and grain: Russia's ambitions in the Black Sea basin, 1737–1834," *International History Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2006, 3–4.
- 5 King, *The Black Sea*, 146.
- 6 The context in LeDonne, "Geopolitics," 4–6.
- 7 The text in *Recueil des principaux traités d'alliance, de paix, de trêve, etc.*, vol. I (1761–1778), edited by Georg Friedrich Martens, J. C. Dietrich, Göttingen, 1791, 507–522; analyses of its significance, from different perspectives, in Matthew Smith Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774–1923: a study in international relations*, Macmillan, London, 1966, XI; Paul Gogeanu, *Strâmtoarele Mării Negre de-a lungul istoriei*, Editura Politică, Bucharest, 1966, 53–59; Roderick H. Davison, "Russian skill and Turkish

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- 8 Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, 2–5. Importance of this in Immanuel Wallerstein and Reşat Kasaba, "Incorporation into the world-economy: change in the structure of the Ottoman Empire, 1750–1839," in the vol. *Économie et sociétés cit.*, 346–347.
- 9 Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, 9–10. The whole context of the annexation in Idem, "The Great Powers and the Russian annexation of the Crimea, 1783–4," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 37, no. 88, 1958, 17–18.
- 10 Idem, *The Eastern Question*, 20.
- 11 LeDonne, "The territorial reform of the Russian Empire 1775–1796. II: The Borderlands, 1777–1796," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1983, 422–424.
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- ²² Harvey, *The development*, 55. Spain was also very interested in these prospects – Eugen Denize, “Spania și Marea Neagră la sfârșitul secolului XVIII,” *Revista istorică*, vol. VII, no. 7–8, 1996, 547–553.
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- ²⁴ Bostan, “The history,” 11–12.
- ²⁵ King, *The Black Sea*, 158–160. Details in R. C. Anderson, “Naval events of the Russo–Turkish war of 1787–1791,” *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, vol. 61, February–May 1916, 309–331 and Donald W. Mitchell, *A history of Russian and Soviet sea power*, Macmillan, New York, 1974, 71–81.
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- ³⁰ Schnakenbourg, “Genèse,” 8–9.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 10–11.
- ³² M. Anthoine, Baron de Saint Joseph, *Essai historique sur le commerce et la navigation en Mer Noire*, V Agasse, Treuttel et Wurtz, Arthus Bertrand, Paris, 1820, 102–104; Schnakenbourg, “Genèse,” 11.
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- 53 Reychnan, “Le commerce,” 236.
- 54 Klimesz, “Poland’s trade,” 70–71.
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- 59 Reychnan, “Le commerce,” 243.
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