

In the second half of the 19th century the Azov sea was one of the largest grain exporting regions of the world. All the big ports of the area, Berdyansk, Mariupol, Taganrog and Rostov were formed and developed as grain export gateways of the vast hinterland that included the heart of the Black Earth provinces, an area stretching from Ukraine in the West to the Volga lands in the East, including part of the Northern Caucasus. They were all cosmopolitan cities formed by immigrants from central, eastern and southeastern Europe. Germans, Austrians, Greeks, Jews, Italians, Armenians, Bulgarians Romanians, Polish and others, along with Russians and Ukrainians all intermingled adding to the increase of the local population and entrepreneurship. Trade and shipping increased in fast rates of growth and during the 19th century attracted hundreds of vessels from all European nations along with the establishment of foreign Consuls from many nations established in the port cities.

Thirty years ago, back in 1987, I started writing my book *A History of Greek-owned Shipping, 19th-20th centuries*. Greek-owned shipping grew to become, and remains to the present day, the largest merchant fleet in the world. Trying to find the roots of this spectacular growth led me to the northern shores of the Black Sea and particularly to the Azov. One of the “discoveries” I made in the late 1980s was that the Azov grain made a large part of Greek-owned shipping in the 19th century and it was at Berdyansk and Taganrog that some of the most important Greek shipowning families started their business. My interest grew for the economic and maritime history of the area and I tried for years to find either access or information to bibliography and archival sources. Late 1980s and early 1990s were a very difficult period for this part of the world and academic communication with the West was close to nil. I was in despair to find information on the Azov ports as absolutely nothing was known in the western bibliography and internet had just been invented and was not yet known. It was then that I discovered an invaluable source that enhanced my studies: the British consular reports. British Consuls, acting for the interest of the country they served, furnished all kinds of detailed and precious qualitative and quantitative information for the cities they were established. They acted in a way as a source of economic, social and political information for the British Empire, one of the main actors in the “Great Game” for the conquest of the lands around the Black Sea that belonged to the Ottoman Empire. To that end systematic and exhaustive information was required on an annual basis.

The information provided by the British Consuls combined with more material of the seamen and shipowners from Greece opened small windows to the world of the Azov ports to me and triggered further interest and curiosity to learn more. It remained hence a lifetime’s quest to be able to approach scholars at these port-cities, to construct and develop academic networks of communication and collaboration. The communication with the universities and research institutes of the Black Sea countries was and still remains difficult. The reasons for this lie on the lack of knowledge of national languages or the lack of a common language of communication, on the limited access to each other’s archives and bibliography and on the lack of adequate research programmes and academic exchanges, for Eastern and Western European historians alike.

It has been only a few years ago that I was given the opportunity to finally “sail” into the Black Sea and to be able to realize a large research project that would encompass all the main port cities of all coasts. The project “The Black Sea and its port-cities, 1774-1914. Development, convergence and linkages with the global economy” is a research project within the Entrepreneurial Research Programme “Thalis”; a collaboration of the Ionian University (project leader) with the University of Crete, University of Thessaly, Hellenic Research Foundation and University of the Aegean, financed by the Greek Ministry of Education and European Union. The aim of the project is the identification, analysis and synthesis of the economic and social development of the main 24 port-cities of the Black Sea that formed an integrated market that became the largest grain-exporting until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The essence of this project is international co-operation, the creation of working networks of communication with the Universities and Research Centres of Black Sea countries and the collective and organized academic opening in an academic area that is not easily accessible to the independent researcher. There are 90 scholars involved in this Project, members of 11 Greek universities and institutes and 21 Black Sea universities and institutes from Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Italy, Norway and the United States.

Following the analytical tools of maritime history the research unit is the maritime region not the state. So, we divide the Black Sea into four main maritime regions, the western, northern, eastern and southern coast. By placing in the centre of the analysis the sea and its ports, the analysis penetrates in

the economic activities of the port-cities, the coastal area and the hinterland, the integration of markets and their interlinkages with the global economy, beyond political boundaries and divisions. The linkages with the global economy triggered development and convergence of regional markets in the global economy. The methodology of this interdisciplinary and interuniversity project is based in the research, analysis and study of primary archival sources. It is based on archival research in the different Black Sea countries and in western European archives and its great strength is the combination and exchange of sources.

Igor Lyman and Victoria Konstantinova have led the way among the Ukrainian researchers in the historical analyses and approaches of the ports of the northern Black Sea coast and the Azov and turned out to be among the best collaborators of the Black Sea project. They turned Berdyansk as a model port-city and provided us with the first results of the project. They have made studies apart from Berdyansk also of Kherson, Taganrog and Rostov-on-Don and have produced hundreds of templates which are uploaded in the website of the programme, www.blacksea.gr. They have presented papers in two of the conferences of the project which took place in Odessa, Constantza/Varna and Istanbul and have contributed to the dissemination of the project to conferences in Spain and Mexico. What is more they have shared and exchanged archival and bibliographical material produced by the members of the project and we have mutually benefited from the academic dialogue instigated within it.

This volume is a prime example of how Igor Lyman and Victoria Konstantinova were able to recognize the opportunities given by an international project. All the new archival material and bibliography amassed by members of the project from Great Britain, France, the United States, Ukraine, Russia, Romania or Turkey were circulated to participants. The great feat of Lyman and Konstantinova is that they took advantage of the opportunities given by the project to enhance their historical view and their work. They combined their studies in the Ukrainian archives and journals with the new information provided by British consular archives and the National Archives of the United Kingdom.

The authors published the British consular reports of Berdyansk with great care to make them available to a wider audience. They not only used the reports provided by the programme but enriched them further with those they were additionally able to trace. The publication of archival sources is a tedious and remarkable work *per se*, but it is usually lost if it is not accompanied by a text to put them into context. Igor Lyman and Victoria Konstantinova chose to write the biographies of the authors of the Berdyansk consular reports. Their life stories are the stories of the Black Sea routes, markets and port-cities.

The way they have written the biographies of the British Consuls in Berdyansk, is neither sterile nor compartmentalized. By further and meticulous research they constructed their lives, works and families and unraveled the history of “the outward looking Berdyansk as it was conceived by Vorontsov”. The histories of the British Consuls reflect the history of the Azov and Black Sea ports as most of them served in various posts in the ports of the area. Through the histories of the Consuls of Berdyansk Konstantinova and Lyman discovered the commercial networks and the sea routes of the British diplomats who acted as “economic spies” furnishing information for the British Empire, not only in the Black Sea but even further in the eastern Mediterranean.

History should be entertaining and make one travel in time and space. The authors by following the paths of the families of the Consuls reveal very interesting and amusing aspects of their descendants. For example, a great-great-grandson of the British Consul in Berdyansk, Robert William Cumberbatch is the contemporary world famous British actor Benedict Timothy Carlton Cumberbatch, who played Sherlock Holmes and other known films. The book gives excellent examples of the Ukrainian and Russian diaspora in Canada, the United States and beyond. The history of the women is not neglected as the interesting story of Amy Evelyn from Consul Greaves’ family reveals.

Furthermore, the study is a contribution to the history of foreign Consuls and the institutions they served along with the problems they had to face in the host countries. It allows us to better understand the official procedure that existed in the Russian Empire, and therefore in the Southern Ukrainian lands, concerning candidates for diplomatic posts. The typology of foreign Consuls in the Russian Empire is also useful as they were divided into non-trading and trading Consuls, distinguishing them to businessmen that served unpaid the post of the Consul and to the ones that served a part of the diplomatic corps paid by the British state. Reading and writing about the Consuls gives a further insight in the economic activity of Berdyansk: agriculture, industry, services, infrastructure are all analyzed.

Victoria Konstantinova and Igor Lyman represent the new dynamic generation of Ukrainian historians that reach out to the international academic community to communicate, to collaborate, to share, to understand and we thank them very much for that.

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