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Genoese maritime trade with the Levant and Russia in the 19th century

The trade in foreign grain from the areas of the Black Sea, an important branch of Genoese maritime commerce, experienced a recovery due to the Treaty with Turkey in 1823. Up until the early 1820s the transport of grains bound for the port of Genova was guaranteed by the Austrian fleet. Later the Sardinian mercantile fleet, also benefitting from the flag discrimination, was able to gain a predominant position in the ports of Turkey and the Black Sea. But more importantly, an important trade in cereals with Ligurian sailing ships was organized by the Genoese shipowners and merchants who had transferred their business to that area. Shipments that often reached the English ports directly, as well as being directed to the Genoese port, where cereals were marketed in the western Mediterranean. A maritime traffic that turns out to be a source of huge profits for the Genoese.

At the time of the Restoration, the agriculture of the Italian states and the countries of Western Europe were hit in different degrees by a serious crisis and a heavy reduction in the prices of principal agricultural products. The cereal sector was hit the hardest¹.

During the Continental Block, the interruption of commercial traffic reinforced the trend to increase the cultivation of grain, corn and other cereals, especially in the Savoy territories and the Kingdom of Naples. For example, in Calabria, the collapse of maritime exports due to the presence of the English fleet along the coasts had caused a dizzying fall in oil and silk prices. There was also a fall in the production of mulberries and olives, in order to cultivate more and more grain². The race to cultivate grain had affected the less-fertile territories all over Italy, causing a progressive reduction in the yield per hectare.

After peace was re-established, the arrival of large quantities of good quality low-priced Russian, Polish and Ukrainian grain in the Port of Odessa strongly

¹ G. Biagioli, *Agricoltura e sviluppo economico: una riconsiderazione del caso italiano nel periodo preunitario*, in «Società e Storia», III, 1980, 9, p. 687.

² D. Moschitti, *Sui progressi delle manifatture, dell'agricoltura, della pastorizia e delle industrie nelle province continentali del Regno dal 1815 in fino ad ora*, in «Annali Civili», fasc. CXI, 1856, pp. 24-25; N. Montuori, *Riflessioni sul commercio*, Napoli, 1830, pp. 119 ss; G. Della Valle, *Cenno sulle cause ed effetti dell'attuale condizione delle nostre principali derrate*, Napoli, 1830, pp. 17-19.

undermined the competitiveness of the cereal sector which was unable to hold up against the competition of Oriental grains³. The notable flow of exportation from the Black Sea had its principal terminals in Genova, Livorno and Marseille. These ports offered warehouses adapted for the conservation of grain destined to be re-exported. Until the first years of the 1820's, the Sardinian flag was forbidden to enter the Black Sea⁴. For this reason the transport of cereals arriving from the port of Genova was protected primarily by the large Austrian ships, which weighed an average of more than 300 tons. In 1823, of the 19 million francs worth of grains transported from the Black Sea by the Genovese, at least 14 million francs worth of grain was carried on ships flying the Austrian flag⁵. A new chapter for the Ligurian mercantile fleet began with the signing of a commercial and navigation treaty with Turkey in 1823. This guaranteed free access to the Black Sea. Genovese merchants and shipowners began opening business and industrial activities linked to the cereal sector. Odessa, Berdiansk, Eupatoria, Ismail, Mariupol, Nicolaiev, Piatigorsk, Taganrog, Theodosia, Kertche were all ports from the Black Sea and Sea of Azov that became part of an important trade business organized with Ligurian ships⁶. These ships sailed directly to Great Britain or to the port of Genova with shipments of cereals to be sold in the western Mediterranean. Cereals exported from the Black Sea ports included wheat, rye, barley, oats and corn. The ports that were most used included, in order of importance, Odessa, Taganrog, Theodosia and Ismail. Two thirds of the grains originating in the Sea of Azov reached Taganrog. In 1827, 1,045,000 rubles worth of cereals were imported. This was the most important flow to Genova after that from Turkey.

The grains were produced in the provinces of Kherson, Podolin, Volinia, Ukraine, and Ekaterinoslav. The best durum wheat was produced in the area around the Sea of Azov. Genovese importation of wheat was recorded at 13 million francs in 1828, 11.5 million in 1829, 23 million in 1830, 22 million in 1831 and more than 29

³ During the time of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies the price had gone down «so low» as to seriously compromise the exportation of domestically produced products. Archivio dell'Istituto d'Incoraggiamento di Napoli, *Società economiche (1816-1825)*, Società di Calabria Citra.

⁴ Archives diplomatiques du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, *Correspondance consulaire et commerciale* [abbreviated as AMAE, *Corr. comm.*], Gênes, tome 100, *Gênes 26 mai 1823*.

⁵ Ivi, *Gênes 26 mai 1824*, p.160. Before signing the treaty with Turkey, the Sardinian ships used either the English flag or the Russian flag to enter the Black Sea. The Russian flag was used more often.

⁶ «Jadis les Pavillons Russe et Autrichien étaient, presque exclusivement, en possession du transport des blés de la Mer Noire, mais depuis le traité passé entre le Roi de Sardaigne et la Porte, les batimens Sardes s'en sont emparés, presque exclusivement aussi et, favorisés par la surtaxe qui pèse sur les grains arrivant sur bâtiment étranger, ils finiront par écarter entièrement les Russes et les Autrichiens, leurs seuls concurrent à cet égard»: ivi, tome 102, *Notes sur le commerce des grains à Gênes*, p. 18.

million in 1832⁷. The importations were carried out almost entirely by Sardinian ships, because of differential duties that were levied on cereals transported by foreign ships. Flag discrimination gave a strong push to the development of the Ligurian merchant sailing fleet ⁸ whose contribution to the transport of cereals heading to the Genoese *entrepôt* went from 30% in 1824 to 92.5% in 1830. As in the past, foreign grains constituted one of the principal Ligurian branches of commerce.

Approximately 400 Ligurian ships per year were utilized for the transport and sale of the cereals from the Black Sea and Levant⁹. Genoese ships coming from Malta with the English flag were added to this number. Odessa was the the port most utilized by the Sardinian ships. The largest importation flow originated there, followed by the port of Taganrog. Lesser quantities flowed from Theodosia, Mariupol, Ismail and Kertche. The city of Odessa was granted free port status in a manifesto dated 6 August, 1817, made official on 15 August, 1819. As a result, all merchandise, except aquavit (strong spirits) was admitted into the city without duty. The port of Odessa was large and able to accomodate a large number of ships. The warehouses were larger than those of the Black Sea and housed great quantities of soft and hard grains that fed the growing export flow which quadrupled in twenty years. The merchants of Odessa had endeavoured to attract foreign merchants by offering payment facilitation, which were carried out in tolar or in «strong Spanish currency»¹⁰. Foreign trade and navigation were in the hands of foreigners. Italians, Greeks, French, English, German and Jews made up the majority of merchants.

Austrian and Sardinian ships occupied the first place; English ships took second place, and the French and Neapolitan were in third place. Very often Ligurian ships dominated the Port of Odessa. They almost exclusively carried grains and

⁷ Ivi, tome 103, *Gênes 15 septembre 1833*, p. 173. The average price in Genova for a *mina* (1,2 hl.) in 1827 was 21 francs; in 1828 it was 25 francs, in 1829 it was more than 29 francs, and reached a 21.15 francs in 1830 and 25.7 francs in 1831. In the successive years it declined to 23.6 francs in 1832, to 20 in 1833 and to 18.10 francs in 1834; see *Mémoire sur le commerce des ports de la Nouvelle-Roussie, de la Moldavie et de la Valachie*, par Jules de Hagemeister, Imprimerie de la ville d'Odessa, 1835, p. 90.

⁸ As the French Consul of Genova observed, «Les constructions se multiplient; on voit sur toutes les plages des bâtimens sur le chantier; et les capitaux considérables gagnés dans ces dernières années par la marine commerçante génoise, ou les emploie à construire d'autres bâtimens»: AMAE, *Corr. comm.*, Gênes, tome 101, *Gênes 21 juillet 1825*, p. 50.

⁹ Ivi, tome 102, *Gênes 15 septembre 1830*, p. 279. In 1830 1,100,000 sacks of grain arrived from Genova from Odessa transported by 382 Sardinian ships: *Recenti Notizie sul commercio dei Porti del Mar Nero, d'Azov e del Danubio*, comunicate all'Accademia dal Colon. Conte L. Serristori, in *Continuazione degli Atti dell'I. e. R. Accademia Economico-Agraria dei Georgofili di Firenze*, Volume XII, Firenze, 1834, p. 249.

¹⁰ AMAE, *Corr. comm.*, Gênes, tome 99, *Mémoire 1821*, p. 183.

small quantities of flour, Ukrainian wax and iron. Overall, the quantities and value of the cereals coming from the Black Sea ports and going directly to Genoa fluctuated. First the Greek insurrection affected the Black Sea traffic; then the Russian-Turkish War of 1827-29 had a major impact on trade in the Black Sea area. Arrivals from the Russian Black Sea ports – absent in 1828 – were limited to 373,300 francs in 1829. In these years, more than 400 ships remained idle in Genoa. Various events impacted the area, including a widespread cholera epidemic in Taganrog at the end of 1830. In 1831 the war in Poland caused a crash in shipments from the interior to Odessa. Wheat was especially impacted. Consequently, the shipments arriving in Genoa were reduced by almost 50%. The hopes generated from the strong leap ahead of the Genoese importations from the Black Sea in 1832 – around 15 million francs – were frustrated by the serious Russian famine of 1833 and the scarce harvest of the following year. Except for during the years of the Russian-Turkish War, the value of Russian exports to the Sardinian states, almost completely consisting of cereals and for the large part destined for Genoa, fluctuated between 7 and 9 million francs, with peaks of 19 and 15 million, respectively, in 1823 and 1832. During the 1840's the values continued to be high, fluctuating between 12 and 21 million francs, with a significant decrease of between 8 and 10 million in the years 1841, 1842 and 1845¹¹.

¹¹ In 1843 1,255,503 hectolitres of grain arrived in Genoa. Around 340,000 hectolitres were intended for the use of the Duchy and of these 875,000 were re-exported (ivi, tome 108, *Gênes 12 juillet 1844*, p. 235). Due to the low price of grain in 1845, (14-15 lire for a *mina*), and the large supplies in the Genoan warehouses, many shipments arriving in Genoa from the Black Sea and Levant were re-directed to Marseille and English ports; ivi, *Gênes 15 juillet 1846*, p. 488.

Tab. 1 – Commercial Exchange Values between Genoa and Russia (in francs)

Year	Genoese imports	Genoese exports
1839	10,200,000	
1840	12,173,800	
1841	8,370,000	
1842	9,000,000	
1843	17,310,000	1,000,000
1844	21,122,000	867,000
1845	10,878,000	1,686,000
1846	14,333,000	1,655,000
1847	29,137,700	
1848	15,080,300	
1849		
1850		
1851	7,262,800	1,189,000
1852	17,644,800	1,562,300
1853	21,401,600	
1854	9,245,500	
1855		
1856	12,361,500	833,100
1857	17,288,000	
1858	14,221,000	
1859	19,599,300	

Source: AMAE, *Corr. comm.*, Gênes, *État du commerce, ad annum.*

The famine, caused by bad cereal and potato harvests throughout much of Europe in the years 1845 and 1846 resulted in an increase of imports of cereal from Russia and the Levant, «where considerable numbers of shipments were sent to the *entrepôt* of Genoa». Genoese merchants and shipowners reduced their trade relations with the Americas «to occupy themselves almost exclusively with the most profitable areas of the Levant and Sea of Azov since the demand for cereals was so strong and thus many of the ships utilized in Transatlantic navigation were directed to the Black Sea»¹². In 1848, the prices of grain which had leaped at Marseille to 35.50 francs per hectoliter, fell by 50%¹³ and the business with the colonies, suspended in 1847 in favor of cereals resumed its activity. Grain business that

¹² Ivi, tome 110, *Gênes 20 avril 1849*, pp. 65-66.

¹³ Ivi, *Gênes 19 décembre 1850*, p. 283.

amounted to 68,454,500 francs in 1847 collapsed to 34,526,900¹⁴ the next year. In the 1850's, except for the years 1854 and 1855 due to the Crimean War, shipments continued, with maximum value of more than 17 million francs in 1852 and 1857 and 19 million in 1859.

In the same years grain traffic of the Genoese mercantile fleets significantly increased with Turkey, whose exports, mainly cereals, reached high values, even with high levels of waste during the decade, passing from 3 million francs in 1851 to more than 12 million in 1854, to then collapse to 2.6 million in 1859, after having arrived at 11.7 million francs in 1856.

Tab. 2 – Commercial interchange value between Genoa and Turkey (in francs)

Year	Genoese Importations	Genoese Exportations
1839	6,000,000	
1840	4,200,000	
1841	4,100,000	
1842		
1843		
1844	5,144,000	1,419,000
1845	2,984,000	1,520,000
1846	2,397,000	841,000
1847		
1848		
1849		
1850		
1851	3,356,400	1,346,800
1852	4,436,100	1,432,900
1853	8,480,400	1,054,400
1854	12,167,800	1,399,000
1855	9,338,000	8,826,000
1856	11,788,300	24,238,700
1857	7,861,000	19,623,000
1858	6,534,000	11,344,000
1859	2,663,400	11,122,100

Source: AMAE, Corr. comm., Gênes, État du commerce, ad annum.

¹⁴ In 1848, the regions of Liguria and Piedmont consumed approximately 30 million francs worth of grain. The other 4 million were exported to Spain, France, Portugal, England, Naples and Tuscany; *ivi, Gênes 15 mars 1850*, p. 323.

In spite of the strong effort of the Genoese merchants in this commercial branch of the «l'entrepôt des céréales à Gênes – it (as the French Consul observed) – diminue sensiblement tandis que celui de Livourne augmente dans la même proportion»¹⁵. The reduction in the grain deposits was attributed to flag discrimination¹⁶ by the Genoese merchants, which in turn caused a reduction in their affluence due to the increasing number of foreign ships in Livorno¹⁷ whose port offered special trade privileges than the Genovese port¹⁸.

¹⁵ Ivi, tome 108, *Gênes 12 juillet 1844*, cit., p. 233.

¹⁶ The Genovese shopkeepers asked for « the repeal or at least the modification» on several occasions (ivi, tome 104, *Travail statistique sur les États de la Sardaigne, Division de Gênes*, p. 329). Also Cavour believed that Genova had lost a part of its granary commerce due to differential duties, which did not exist in Livorno (ivi, Turin, tome 9, *Turin 3 juin 1850*). See A. La Macchia, *Aspetti dell'economia marittima genovese nei primi decenni della Restaurazione*, in R. Battaglia, S. Bottari, A. La Macchia, *Porti e traffici nel Mediterraneo. Tre saggi di storia economica marittima (1695-1861)*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2018, pp. 33-34.

¹⁷ Département de l'Agriculture, du Commerce et des Travaux publics, *Annales du Commerce Extérieur, Italie*, [abbreviated as DACT, *Ann. Comm. Ext., It.*], *États Sardes, Faits commerciaux*, Paris, Imprimerie et Librairie Administratives de P. Dupont, 1863, n. 3, p. 7.

¹⁸ The privilege that the grain transport ships enjoyed which enabled them to unload outside of the Lazaretto limit, without being quarantined, as opposed to Genoa, inspired the French Consul of Genoa to comment that «it contributed to making Livorno one of the main grain deposits of the Black Sea»: AMAE, *Corr. comm.*, Gênes, tome 106, *Travail sur les usages commerciaux de la place de Gênes*, pp. 42-43.

Tab. 3 – Quantity of cereals deposited in Genoa and Livorno warehouses from 1822 to 1843 (in quintals)

Years	Genoa	Livorno
1822	656.651	490.000
1823	1.125.799	285.574
1824	900.640	350.272
1825	514.095	315.625
1826	462.147	406.692
1827	392.450	879.322
1828	470.815	664.560
1829	447.849	489.814
1830	848.120	962.380
1831	642.350	641.520
1832	827.347	748.440
1833	416.336	855.360
1834	351.672	427.680
1835	347.270	507.870
1836	710.666	534.600
1837	777.240	962.280
1838	519.849	1.496.880
1839	584.980	1.603.800
1840	651.920	1.069.200
1841	450.660	855.360
1842	118.200	748.440
1843	213.440	1.283.040

Source: AMAE, *Corr. comm.*, Gênes, tome 102, *Commerce de Gênes, juillet 1831*, p. 394 and tome 108, *État du commerce, Gênes 12 juillet 1844*, pp.233-234.

Mainly Austrian, Russian, English, Greek and Genoese ships supplied the Livornese *entrepôt*. Great numbers of the Genoese were also involved in marketing the products of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the Black Sea ports. Oil, lemon juice, lemon and orange peels, sweet and bitter almonds, manna, sulphur, lemons and fresh oranges and Marsala wines purchased by Sardinian merchants in Messina,

frequently reached Odessa in ships. Large, heavy quantities were transported to Taganrog and Theodosia to be sent into the Russian interior¹⁹.

Commercial trade with Russian ports was largely carried out by the Genovese on behalf of the Neapolitans without a Sublime Porte Convention until 16 October, 1827. The Sublime Porte Convention was ratified on 14 December 1827. The situation did not change significantly in the following years due to the lack of a Neapolitan consular network, whereas the Piedmontese consular network, entrusted to vice-consuls, present in Taganrog, Theodosia and Ismail, on the Danube, was far superior.

This commercial network created by Genoa enabled the exportation of many products including olive oil, Parma cheese, rice, sugar, coffee, wine, citrus, fruit, chairs, lead and cork for bottles. The products were shipped to Odessa, Taganrog, Theodosia, Ismail, Mariupol, Kertche and Berdiansk.

However, even with an increase in exported products, the value of imported goods to Russia remained significantly less than Russian exports because of the prohibitive customs system. In 1821 an imperial decree increased duties on sugar, coffee, wine – Italian, French and Spanish types – and manufactured goods by 50%. Hence, the Russian market demonstrated itself to be oriented more towards exportation rather than importation.

Different characteristics were involved in the commercial relationships between Genoa and Turkey. For example, until the end of the 1850's there was a conspicuous advance in the commercial balance in favor of Turkey. A radical mutation occurred in the years 1856-59 identified by a constant Turkish deficit, owing above all to the strong Genoese exportations of cotton textiles, and in less measure, rice.

The scope of this work deals with the pre-unification period, therefore the years following the Italian unification are not discussed.

¹⁹ V. Giura, *Russia, Stati Uniti d'America e Regno di Napoli nell'età del Risorgimento*, Napoli, E.S.I., 1967, pp. 54-65 e 82.