

Sailing to European *entrepôts*: Romanian farming and the Antwerp international grain market (1881–1914)

CRISTIAN CONSTANTIN

Abstrakt | Abstract

Plavba do evropských entrepôtů: Rumunské zemědělství a mezinárodní trh s obilím v Antverpách (1881–1914)

Článek zkoumá expanzi obchodu s obilím na konci 19. a na počátku 20. století optikou přínosu východní Evropy, konkrétně Rumunska. Jedná se o vítané doplnění, neboť dosavadní studie obvykle zdůrazňují roli severoamerického obilí, přitom význam východní Evropy byl rovněž impozantní. Na konci 19. století bylo vytvořeno spojení mezi přístavy na dolním Dunaji a entrepôtem v Antverpách, které bylo nezbytné jak pro oba konce sítě, tak pro širší obchodní prostředí. Autor v tomto původním příspěvku kombinuje diplomatické prameny z belgických i rumunských archivů.

The paper contributes to the research on the expansion of the grain trade in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by looking at the contribution of Eastern Europe, more specifically, Romania. This would be a welcome addition, since existing studies often emphasise the contribution of Northern American grain, while that of Eastern Europe was also impressive. At the end of the nineteenth century, a connection was created between the ports of the Lower Danube and the entrepôt in Antwerp, a connection that was indispensable for the two ends of the network but also for the business environment. The paper has an original approach, since the author does not (only) use published quantitative sources but combines diplomatic archival material from both Belgium and Romania.

Klíčová slova | Keywords

diplomacie; námořní síť; dopravní infrastruktura; námořní obchod

diplomacy; maritime networks; transport infrastructure; maritime trade

Introduction

When a geopolitical crisis escalates, diplomats and conjectural analysts often resort, in their public argumentation, to a phrase attributed to the philosopher George Santayana to demonstrate the didactic role of the past, but also to invoke a certain cyclicity of historical events: 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'.¹ Among other things, analysts of the economy of the post-Soviet space have carefully observed the role of multinational companies, which resumed the exploitation of the Black Sea grain basin after the disappearance of the Soviet Union (26 December 1991) and the (re)connection of the northern and western Pontic hinterlands to the maritime trade of European warehouses. 'The bread was made on the water' thanks to Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, and Bulgarian farmers. The return to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe also brought with it the tools of true capitalism: entrepreneurial elements, set up in the form of multinational companies, with headquarters in the world's major port/financial centres and connections on all economic levels, willing to meet the demands of the international grain market.²

For many analysts, the 'special military operation' launched at dawn on 24 February 2022, when the Russian Federation invaded and occupied significant parts of Ukraine, triggering a war of attrition between Russian and Ukrainian troops, adding to the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and Donbas since 2014, bears striking economic similarities to the challenges posed by the Crimean War (1853–1856).³ More than a century and a half after the rise of Russophobia and the coalition's victory against the Tsarist army, European anti-Russian sentiment has been heightened amid the international crisis over Ukrainian grain and the discontent among other European farmers. George Santayana's phrase seems to offer a (partial) escape to all, by opting for past solutions, as evidence of a relatively peaceful cohabitation and mutual interest

1 George SANTAYANA, *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense VII 7. Book 1. The Works of George Santayana*, eds. Marian S. Woceck – Martin A. Coleman, Cambridge Massachusetts – London 2011, p. 172.

2 Elena LIOUBIMTSEVA – Geoffrey M. HENEBRY, *Grain production trends in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan: New opportunities in an increasingly unstable world?*, *Frontiers in Earth Science* 6, 2012, pp. 157–166; Szvetlana ACS et al., *Ukraine's agriculture: potential for expanding grain supply. Economic and institutional challenges*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg 2013; Antoine ROGER, *Power in the Field. Explaining the Legitimation of Large-Scale Farming in Romania*, *Sociologia Ruralis* 56 (2), 2016, pp. 311–328; Cristian CONSTANTIN, *Multinationals in the Grain Trade: The Louis Dreyfus Company at the Lower Danube, 1889–1948*, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 26 (1), 2024, pp. 41–62.

3 Constantin ARDELEANU, *International Trade and Diplomacy at the Lower Danube: The Sulina Question and the Economic Premises of the Crimean War (1829–1853)*, Brăila 2014; Winfried BAUMGART, *The Crimean War: 1853–1856*, second edition, London – New York 2020.

of the international grain market in agricultural products from the Black Sea basin.⁴

The idea that Romania (Oltenia, Wallachia, Dobruja, and Moldavia regions) is a state with a high agricultural potential is one of the widely accepted truths in Romanian culture. It was not, however, the main source of grain supply for the large urban centres of Europe in the second half of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century. In the context of population growth and industrialisation in Western and Central Europe, the international grain trade, managed in an exemplary manner by large *entrepôts*⁵ and profitably by multinational grain companies, increased in quantity and the geographical division of labour deepened. While Western European countries specialised mainly in industrial production, others, such as Romania, remained anchored in a pre-industrial economy (partly reminding of the mediaeval times), in which the increase in agricultural production and the export of cereals were the most striking aspects of economic development throughout ‘the long 19th century’.⁶ The countries in the latter category assumed the role of a viable and complementary source of daily food for the English, French, and Germans, and sometimes, thanks to the movement of agricultural products between the large ports and urban centres of Central Europe, they even found their way to the tables of the inhabitants of Prague, Bratislava, and Vienna.⁷

From this point of view, it is interesting to follow what the situation was around 1900 between Antwerp, a major and modern Belgian grain warehouse, and the Danube hinterland, a subsidiary source of trade stocks in the Black Sea *entrepôts* system owned by Tsarist Russia (the then owner of the disputed Ukrainian territories today). The followers of cyclicity and the lessons of history, as proposed by George Santayana, as well as international public opinion, can see certain similarities with the current grain crisis caused by the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation: international negotiations, tariff measures, routes and means of transport, stimulation

4 Michael ATKIN, *The international grain trade*, second edition, Cambridge 1995, pp. 149–162; Kibrom A. ABAY et al., *The Russia-Ukraine war: Implications for global and regional food security and potential policy responses*, *Global Food Security* 36, March 2023, pp. 1–11; Linde GÖTZ et al., *Russia's Grain Exports and Supply Risks during Russia's War in Ukraine*, *Russian Analytical Digest* 304, 2023, pp. 12–17.

5 Warehouses or deposit-ports.

6 Bogdan MURGESCU, *Țările Române între Imperiul Otoman și Europa creștină*, Iași 2012, pp. 244–265.

7 Karl GUNNAR PERSSON, *Grain Markets in Europe, 1500–1990: Integration and Deregulation*, Cambridge 2004.

of productive structures, competitiveness, etc.⁸ However, the realities are much more complex and specific to the age in focus, which is why this study is shaped as a scientific journey more easily to decipher by economic historians, and fairly different from popularising articles aimed at a non-specialist readership.

Europe stepped into the long nineteenth century destroyed by the anthropic factor. The ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution of 1789, the traumas of armed conflicts and the redesigning of maps that followed the Napoleonic Wars left their mark on the European population and civilisation.⁹ But, above all, the Industrial Revolution, with its successive stages and its different phases of development from one region of the planet to another, constituted the 'Big Bang' of the structural transformations of human society as a whole. The seas and oceans of the world began to be roamed more and more steadily and profitably by the skilled seafarers of the traditional navigation and trading companies of Europe, most of them owned or directed by the state whose flag they displayed on their masts. The power produced by steam engines radically changed world trade: the steamships replaced the venerable sailing ships.¹⁰

The winds of change blew slowly and became much stronger in the second half of the 19th century. Travel time and freight prices steadily decreased, and transport capacity increased considerably in just a few decades. Information travelled faster after the use of the telegraph in economic operations.¹¹ The European world encountered technological and economic progress at different paces, which was, in

8 Adam ROSE – Zhenhua CHEN – Dan WEI, *The economic impacts of Russia–Ukraine War export disruptions of grain commodities*, Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy 45 (2), 2023, pp. 645–665; Stephen DEVADOSS – William RIDLEY, *Impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the global wheat market*, World Development 173, January 2024, pp. 1–11.

9 Kim OOSTERLINCK – Loredana URECHE-RANGAU – Jacques-Marie VASLIN, *Baring, Wellington and the Resurrection of French Public Finances following Waterloo*, The Journal of Economic History 74 (2), 2014, pp. 1072–1102.

10 C. KNICK HARLEY, *Coal Exports and British Shipping, 1850–1913*, Explorations in Economic History 26, 1989, pp. 311–338; David CHILOSI – Tommy E. MURPHY – Roman STUDER – A. COŞKUN TUNÇER, *Europe's Many Integrations: Geography and Grain Markets, 1620–1913*, Explorations in Economic History I (1), 2013, pp. 46–68; Karl GUNNAR PERSSON, *Mind the Gap! Transport Costs and Price Convergence in the Nineteenth Century Atlantic Economy*, European Review of Economic History 8 (2), 2004, pp. 125–147; C. KNICK HARLEY, *Transportation, the World Wheat Trade, and the Kuznets Cycle, 1850–1913*, Explorations in Economic History 17 (3), 1980, pp. 218–250.

11 K. GUNNAR PERSSON, *Grain Markets in Europe, 1500–1990*; Mette EJRNÆS – Karl GUNNAR PERSSON, *The Gains from Improved Market Efficiency: Trade before and after the Transatlantic Telegraph*, European Review of Economic History 14 (3), 2010, pp. 361–381; David S. JACKS, *What Drove 19th Century Commodity Market Integration?*, Explorations in Economic History 43 (3), 2006, pp. 383–412; Kevin H. O'ROURKE, *The European Grain Invasion, 1870–1913*, The Journal of Economic History 57 (4), 1997, pp. 775–801.

part, a consequence of the gaps within the society each inhabitant came from.¹² However, they all had to feed themselves.

Land roads and railways developed thoroughly, driving production structures and long-distance trade, and were the decisive factor for the progress recorded in the nineteenth century: the increasingly easy connection of the continental peripheries to the epicentre of change, Western Europe. Seas and rivers became the conveyors of technological, social, and economic development.¹³ This study traces the trajectory of trade between the Lower Danube hinterland and Belgian ports to understand the role of Moldo-Wallachian production structures in the grain trade of Belgian entrepôts.

This paper answers several questions posited by economists and historians over the years. What was the role of European economic policies in the evolution of Belgian-Romanian trade? Did the tariffs imposed by the two governments allow for a more consistent Belgian import of Romanian grain after 1880? Were the free-exchange policies more beneficial for the grain trade between Romanian ports and Belgian entrepôts? Are these assumptions statistically valid? What was the role of diplomacy in increasing the trade between the ports at the Lower Danube and the Belgian ones? Did important members of the European entrepreneurial environment also become diplomatic figures of the two states? Did these 'merchant diplomats' propel the Romanian-Belgian trade?

Historiography and methodology

Historians have demonstrated through their publications a point that is uncontested by the academia: foreign documents are an important source for studying the past of any nation and, by extension, the trade relations between different regions and nations. Among the documents that have come to the attention of researchers are those in the Belgian and Romanian archives. In the Archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic reports are kept, which arrived in Brussels from the Romanian Principalities/Romania as early as in the 1830s. Belgium became an independent and neutral state in 1830, following the break-up of the Union of the Netherlands. At the same time, documents relating to the Romanian area, preserved in the Belgian archives, also come from the capitals of other European states.

12 See an excellent analysis of the Romanian case in: Bogdan MURGESCU, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1550–1950)*, Iași 2010.

13 John H. JENSEN – Gerhard ROSEGGGER, *Transferring Technology to a Peripheral Economy: The Case of Lower Danube Transport Development, 1856–1928*, *Technology and Culture* 19 (4), 1978, pp. 675–702; Constantin ARDELEANU – Andreas LYBERATOS (eds.), *Port Cities of Western Black Sea Coast and the Danube: Economic and Social Development in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Corfu 2016.

Representatives of Belgium were eyewitnesses to the debates on the 'Eastern Question', the solution of which also required dealing with the problem of establishing a Romanian state at the mouth of the Danube, to be used as a barrier between the Russian, Ottoman, and Austrian empires. Belgian diplomatic documents¹⁴ are a source of prime importance on the Romanian space, representing the emanation of the chancelleries and diplomatic representatives of a neutral state, well positioned geographically, at the crossroads of international commercial interests. In addition to these, there are the Romanian and Belgian consular reports preserved in the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, as well as documents deposited at the Romanian National Archives in the major Romanian ports.

With the exception of thorough analyses of trade, the issue of Romanian-Belgian relations throughout the 19th century has been treated quite extensively up to this point. Aurel Filimon almost monopolised this line of research for many decades.¹⁵ The subject was not exhausted by communist historiography and was taken up again,

14 See the *Recueil consulaire Belge* series, vol. 1–15, years 1855–1869, Brussels 1855–1870.

15 Aurel Filimon continued the initiative started by Romanian researchers before the communisation of Romania [C.C. ANGELESCU, *Studentii români în străinătate. Universitatea din Brussels*, Studii și Cercetări Istorice 17, 1943, pp. 119–126] and produced several works on Romanian-Belgian relations throughout the nineteenth century. See: Aurel FILIMON, *Informații privind istoria României în documente diplomatice belgiene. Tratatule economice româno-germane din anul 1892*, *Analele Universității 'Al. I. Cuza' din Iași*, Seria Istorie 16, 1970, pp. 171–178; idem, *Quelques données concernant les relations entre la Roumanie et la Belgique au XIX-e siècle*, *Revue Belge d'histoire contemporaine* 2 (1), 1970, pp. 21–26; idem, *Stabilirea consulatelor belgiene în România*, *Analele Universității 'Al. I. Cuza' din Iași*, Seria Istorie 17 (2), 1971, pp. 225–231; idem, *Schimburi comerciale între Belgia și Principatele române în perioada 1830–1859*, *Analele Universității 'Al. I. Cuza' din Iași*, Seria Istorie 19 (1), 1973, pp. 75–83; idem, *Documente diplomatice belgiene despre Unirea Principatelor*, *Revista de istorie* 27 (1), 1974, pp. 85–95; idem, *Relațiile româno-belgiene în secolul al XIX-lea*, unpublished PhD thesis, 'Alexandru Ioan Cuza' University of Iași, 1974, 408 pages; idem, *Relațiile româno-belgiene între 1859–1878*, *Revista de istorie* 31 (2), 1978, pp. 223–239; idem, *Les relations roumano-belges de 1879 à 1900*, *Nouvelles Études d'Histoire. Nouvelles Études d'Histoire. Publiées à l'occasion du XVe congrès international des sciences historiques* 6, 1980, pp. 249–267; idem, *Relațiile româno-belgiene în epoca modernă*, Focșani 1998. See also Gheorghe PLATON's study, *Le diplomate belge Edouard Blondeel van Cuelebroeck dans les Principautés Roumaines*, *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire* 16 (1), 1977, pp. 43–66.

mainly on cultural themes, after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989.¹⁶ Nor have historians from outside Romania missed the chance to exploit such an attractive subject in the history of Belgium's cultural, social, economic and political relations at the 'Gates of the Orient' throughout the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁷ The most recent extensive description of the relations between Belgium and the Romanian Principalities comes from Jan Anckaer,¹⁸ and includes a summary of the activities of the Belgian consulates in Bucharest, Brăila (Ibrail/a), Galați (Galatz/i) and Iași (Jassy). The consular offices were set up to boost trade between the two regions.

-
- 16 Laurențiu VLAD, *Pe urmele „Belgiei Orientului”. România la expozițiile universale sau internaționale de la Anvers, Brussels, Liège și Gand (1894–1935)*, Bucharest 2004; idem, *À la recherche de la Belgique orientale. La Roumanie et l'Exposition universelle et internationale de Liège, 1905*, Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review 2 (4), 2002, pp. 981–994; idem, *À la recherche de la Belgique Orientale. Quelques notes sur l'histoire d'un stereotype*, Symposia. Caiete de Etnologie și Antropologie 2, 2003, pp. 277–286; Idesbald GODDEERIS, *Les relations entre la Belgique et la Roumanie, 1859–1939 (–1989)*, Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review 8 (1), 2008, pp. 47–55; Philippe BEKE (ed.), *175 ani de relații diplomatice româno-belgiene 1. România și Belgia, dinamica relațiilor politico-diplomatice, economice și culturale în perioada formării și consolidării statului-națiune, între 1838 și 1916*, Brussels – Bucharest 2013; Philippe BEKE – Ana Ioana Iriciuc (eds.), *175 ani de relații diplomatice româno-belgiene 2. România și Belgia în perioada interbelică. O interacțiune bilaterală de la Tratatul de la Versailles până în întunecații ani 1940*, Brussels – Bucharest 2014; Philippe BEKE – Ana Ioana Iriciuc (eds.), *175 ani de relații diplomatice româno-belgiene 3. Lumini și umbre în relațiile româno-belgiene după cel de al Doilea Război Mondial: de la antagonismul Războiului Rece la agenda comună a Uniunii Europene și NATO*, Brussels – Bucharest 2015; Ionel MUNTEANU, *Noi cercetări în relațiile economice româno-belgiene (Bisschop–Poumay)*, Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» – Series Historica – Supliment 61, 2022, pp. 129–142.
- 17 Léon DEMARET, *Les gisements pétrolifères de la Roumanie*, Annales des Mines de Belgique 8, 1908, p. 7; E. GAIFFIER D'EESTROY, *La situation financière, agricole, industrielle et commerciale de la Roumanie en 1910*, Recueil consulaire belge, Brussels 1911; Gaston de LOOZ-CORSWAREM, *Belgique et Roumanie*, Brussels 1911; Félix GODART, *La Roumanie agricole*, Les Mercuriales Agricoles 2, 1913, p. 8; Joseph DUQUÉ, *Les exploitations pétrolifères en Roumanie et les intérêts belges dans cette industrie*, Association des Licenciés sortis de l'Université de Liège 8, 1913, pp. 28–30; Octave BURSTIN, *Le marché belge des produits pétrolifères et les débouchés qu'il offre à l'exportation roumaine*, Moniteur du Pétrole roumain 18, 1933, p. 14; Joseph SIGAL, *Réflexions à propos des échanges entre la Roumanie et la Belgique*, Brussels 1936; idem, *Rapports économiques entre la Roumanie et la Belgique depuis 1892*, Brussels 1937; E. VANDEWOUDE, *Le comte de Flandre et le trône de Roumanie en 1855*, Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique 40, 1969, pp. 464–472; Colette SCHYNS, *Les investissements belges en Europe centrale et balkanique de 1896 à 1940*, Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, Université Libre de Brussels, Brussels 1979; Béatrice NIZET, *Le début des investissements pétroliers belges en Europe orientale, 1895–1914*, in: Michel Dumoulin – Eddy Stols (eds.), *La Belgique et l'étranger aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Brussels 1987, pp. 51–58.
- 18 Jan ANCKAER, *Small Power Diplomacy and Commerce. Belgium and the Ottoman Empire during the Reign of Leopold I (1831–1865)*, Istanbul 2013.

The concept of *economic development* in the nineteenth century Romanian area has been defined by Angela Harre¹⁹ and should be read 'in relation to the economic transformation in the two principalities after the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), by which Russia forced the opening of the lower Danube for European trading navigation'.²⁰ The inclusion of the Romanian area on the European capitalist market and the limitation of exports to Constantinople, in favour of European entrepôts, led to 'the enrichment of the *development* concept with social and political connotations and the limitation of the use of the antonymous concept of *underdevelopment*'.²¹ In line with Angela Harre's research, this paper is attempting to prove the hypothesis which claims that trade at the Mouth of Danube encountered a sudden positive change after 1829 and a good dynamic at the end of the nineteenth century due to the considerable amount of Romanian grain exports to European entrepôts. At the same time, in agreement with the recent studies of the researcher Gelina Harlaftis,²² a maritime history expert, we will show how the infrastructure of a foreland was created and developed in close connection with maritime trading, also drawing in the local production structures.

Using methods specific to history, maritime economic history tackles the economic structures and events that have marked major changes in the evolution of communities in the past, among other things, arguing the influence of natural and anthropogenic factors on the economic course of some regions of the Terra.²³

From a methodological point of view, the study of economic history is different from strictly economic analyses on three counts: a) the approach (historical analyses are mainly inductive); b) the result of the study (the aim is to obtain a plausible description and not strictly to formulate an explanation); c) the aim/objective (the main objective of the research is to verify a theoretical hypothesis formulated

19 Angela HARRE, *Conceptul de progres: relația conflictuală dintre liberalism și intervenția statală*, in: Victor Neumann – Armin Heinen (eds.), *Istoria României prin concepte. Perspective alternative asupra limbajelor social-politice*, Iași 2010, pp. 173–199.

20 Ibidem, p. 174.

21 Ibidem.

22 Gelina HARLAFTIS, *Maritime History or the History of thalassa*, in: Gelina Harlaftis – Nikos Karapidakis – Kostas Sbonias – Vaios Vaiopoulos (eds.), *The New Ways of History*, London 2009, pp. 211–238; Gelina HARLAFTIS, *Black Sea Maritime and Economic History. The integration of the port-cities to the global economy*, in: Gelina Harlaftis – Victoria Konstantinova – Igor Lyman, Anna Sydorenko – Eka Tchoidze (eds.), *Between Grain and Oil from the Azov to the Caucasus: the Port-Cities of the Eastern Coast of the Black Sea, late 18th – early 20th Century*, Rethymnon 2020, pp. 3–32; Gelina HARLAFTIS, *Forum Introduction: What is maritime history?*, *The International Journal of Maritime History* 32 (2), 2020, pp. 354–363; eadem, *Maritime history: A new version of the old version and the true history of the sea*, *The International Journal of Maritime History* 32 (2), 2020, pp. 383–402.

23 Lewis R. FISCHER, *The Future Course of Maritime History*, *The International Journal of Maritime History* 29 (2), 2017, pp. 355–364.

previously, not to combat existing theoretical hypotheses).²⁴ This study combines traditional historical research methods (inductive) with empirical analysis (deductive) specific to economics. In the absence of a thorough and (partly) unpublished Belgian statistical series capable of reconstructing the full picture of Moldo-Wallachian grain exports to Belgian warehouses,²⁵ we have resorted to diplomatic sources kept at the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania in Bucharest, corroborated with documents from the network of services of the National Archives of Romania in the ports of the Danube. In this context, we can obtain a view from the perspective of Romanian statistics, existing at the level of the main Romanian export ports, on trade between Romania and Belgium. The role of the reports of Romanian and Belgian diplomats in the capitals and main ports of the two countries is essential to understand the negotiations carried out at the highest level to boost trade in order to perceive the obstacles and shortcomings existing at the international level. Thus, the reports of ambassadors and (vice)consuls enrich the picture of Romanian-Belgian trade relations.

Therefore, we have resorted to the critical analysis of historical sources specific to the economic history of the ports of the Lower Danube and the main Belgian entrepôt, Antwerp, by consciously combining knowledge from outside the primary sources and from within them to (re)establish historical facts and processes. Beforehand, we interpreted, compared, and related the data and facts characteristic of the processes specific to the Moldo-Wallachian production structures with the historical-economic phenomena of the modern era (fiscal policies and the evolution of transport), corroborating them with the actions of commercial diplomacy at the level of European chancelleries.

To illustrate the results obtained from the use of the statistical method, specific to economic history, we have resorted to the graphical method, which consisted in producing graphical representations (tables and graph figures) that are intended to

24 See, for example, Witold KULA, *Problemi i metodi di storia economica*, Milan 1970; D. C. COLEMAN et al., *What is Economic History ... ?*, in: J. Gardiner (ed.), *What is History Today... ?*, London 1988, pp. 31–41; Carlo M. CIPOLLA, *Between History and Economics: An Introduction to Economic History*, Oxford 1991; Graeme Donald SNOOK, *Economics without Time: A Science Blind to the Forces of Historical Change*, London 1993; Gerold AMBROSIUS – Dietmar PTZINA – Werner PLUMPE, *Moderne Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Ein Einführung Historiker und Ökonomen*, Herausgegeben, Munich 1996; Joel MOKYR (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Economic History*, 5 vols., Oxford 2003; Emil DINGA, *Studii de economie, Contribuții de analiză logică, epistemologică și metodologică*, Bucharest 2009, pp. 431–436.

25 D. DEGRÈVE, *Le commerce extérieur de la Belgique, 1830–1913–1939. Présentation critique des données statistiques. Histoire Quantitative et Développement de la Belgique V. Les relations internationales belges 1830–1913 1a–b*, Brussels 1982. See: *Statistique de la Belgique: tableau général du commerce avec les pays étrangers*, 1883, Brussels 1884.

facilitate the perception of the results offered by the statistical data of the maritime trade between Romanian ports and the main Belgian entrepôt. Statistical and graphical methods, like any other methods, have their limitations and do not automatically provide answers to the research questions. In order to overcome this shortcoming, we have resorted to the comparative method, standardising as much as possible in advance the different units of measurement and types of currency used in the international grain markets. However, the results of analyses using statistical and graphical methods must be viewed with some caution and always in comparison with the results of other documentary analyses. While statistics are always considered to be relative, the role of the economic historian is mainly to explain the evolution of certain phenomena produced at the economic level.²⁶

Profitability of Moldo-Wallachian production structures in the context of Belgian industrialisation

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the 'agricultural invasion', as it is called in the literature,²⁷ a crisis of overproduction that led to the sale of grain at relatively low prices in order to cover production costs and cope with international competition.²⁸ The geographical location of Wallachia and Moldavia influenced the dominant character of grain cultivation in the agriculture of the two Romanian Principalities.²⁹ In 1881, the year of the proclamation of the Kingdom, Romania was a country with an area of 130,177 km² and a population of 4.7 million inhabitants, dominated by wheat and maize, accounting for about three-quarters of all grain grown.³⁰

In his long travels through Romania, Frédéric Hoorickx, Belgium's Minister Plenipotentiary in Romania, made a brief description of the status of the mouths of the Danube, evoking the richness of the Romanian land, the picturesque summer landscapes, with temperatures up to +34° Celsius, and the winter ones, with minima reaching -20° Celsius. The Belgian diplomat F. Hoorickx visited various places in the young Romanian Kingdom, an opportunity to underline the importance of the

26 W. KULA, *Problemi i metodi di storia economica*; L.R. FISCHER, *The Future*, pp. 355–364.

27 See K. GUNNAR PERSSON, *Grain Markets in Europe*.

28 See reviews on Belgian agriculture: J. GADISSEUR, *Contribution à l'étude de la production agricole en Belgique de 1846 à 1913*, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 4 (1–2), 1973, pp. 1–48; J. HANNES – W. VANDERIJPEN, *Teeltplan, produktie en produktiekosten. De landbouw in enkele gemeenten van de provincies Antwerpen en Oost-Vlaanderen (begin 19e eeuw)*, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 4 (1–2), 1973, pp. 67–107.

29 Marcel EMERIT, *Les paysans roumains depuis le traité d'Adrianople jusqu'à la liberation des terres, 1829–1864*, Paris 1937; Ilie CORFUS, *Agricultura în Țările Române, 1848–1864*, Bucharest 1982; Apostol STAN, *Agricultura românească în faza finală a clăcășiei, 1831–1864*, Bucharest 1994.

30 *La Roumanie 1866–1906*, Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Industrie, du Commerce et des Domaines, Bucharest 1907, pp. 269–272.

hydrographic system and the central role of the Danube, which was the most important source of water for grain crops, stretching for about 500 km along the southern border of the country. Also, the inland water system, with rivers flowing from the Carpathian Mountains into the Danube and abundant snowfall, played a major role in increasing food production in Moldavia and Wallachia.³¹

The grain production of the Moldavian-Wallachian large estates fluctuated positively in proportion to supplies on foreign markets. In general, landowners and tenants complied with the qualitative requirements of the entrepreneurial environment. Historian Bogdan Murgescu believes that 'Western demand and population growth stimulated the increase in Romanian grain production', and 'as total production growth far exceeded population growth, exports increased considerably'.³²

After 1870, Moldo-Wallachian production structures had to counter the competition of American grain placed in European entrepôts and gradually came to meet the high standards of the international business environment. Grain exports created a socio-political and legislative environment that was permissive for large-scale farmers. For some economic historians, Romanian agriculture in the second half of the nineteenth century proved profitable precisely because of the incipient level of capitalism in Romanian society.³³ New pertinent analyses,³⁴ based on the correlation of unpublished archival documents with the classical historiography of the agrarian problem in Romania, have been carried out in the last decade and confirm the previous theories of John R. Lampe and Marvin R. Jackson³⁵ and of the Romanian researchers Victor Axenciuc³⁶ and Bogdan Murgescu.³⁷

Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea formulated the theory of serfdom,³⁸ by which he proved that the dominant social relations in Romanian agriculture between the two

31 F. HOORICKS, *D'un voyage d'exploration en Roumanie*, Brussels 1892, pp. 3–4.

32 B. MURGESCU, *Țările Române între Imperiul Otoman și Europa creștină*, pp. 269–274.

33 Victor AXENCIUC, *Evoluția economică a României. Cercetări statistico-istorice 1859–1947* 2. *Agricultura*, Bucharest 1996, p. 80.

34 See empirical research and objective reviews of the Moldo-Wallachian production structures in: Cristian CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării: integrarea pe piață, structuri productive și infrastructura de transport (1829–1940)*, Brăila 2018, pp. 65–74, 133–182. See objective Western travellers' objective descriptions of Moldo-Wallachian agriculture in: C. ARDELEANU, *International Trade and Diplomacy at the Lower Danube*.

35 John R. LAMPE – Marvin R. JACKSON, *Balkan Economic History, 1550–1950: From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations*, Bloomington 1982, pp. 155–201. See another pertinent point of view in: Stefan WELZK, *Nationalkapitalismus versus Weltmarktintegration? Rumänien 1830–1944. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie eigenständiger Entwicklung*, Saarbrücken 1982.

36 V. AXENCIUC, *Evoluția economică a României* 2, p. 80.

37 B. MURGESCU, *România și Europa*, pp. 103–204; B. MURGESCU, *Țările Române între Imperiul Otoman și Europa creștină*, pp. 244–268.

38 Constantin DOBROGEANU GHEREA, *Neoiobăgia*, Bucharest 1909.

contractual parties, on the one hand, the landowners and tenants, and on the other hand the peasantry 'under contract', kept in their composition feudal customs that took on new forms after the connection of the Moldo-Wallachian economy to the Western one.³⁹ The period between the agrarian reform of 1864 and the First World War represents for the agrarian regime in Romania 'the expression of the transition from the feudal agrarian system to the peasant agrarian system' and 'was based on the bipolarity of the agricultural system: the large-landed and the tenant farming and the small peasant farming'.⁴⁰

Romania in the 1900s was dominated by a society dependent on grain production, in which the large tenant trusts made the most profitable deals. Maximising profit required the approach of extensive farming, and this was speculated upon by the large landowners and tenants. The most profitable ventures involved leasing over 5,000 ha of state-owned arable land, more than 70 % of which was worked with the farmer's agricultural inventory or sublet (under various forms of agricultural tenancy) to peasants. Romania was shaken by a strong peasant uprising in the spring of 1907 precisely because, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a 5,000-hectare estate leased out was extremely profitable for its lessees and owners, but it exploited the peasant workforce thoroughly and for paltry compensation. At an average price of 11 shillings/ha, the state was paid £ 2,750 by the lessee. The average value of grain production in that period for the same arable area was about £46,384. Of this sum, the tenant paid the rent and the full average cost of the agricultural work done on the grain, about £ 12,000 (£ 2 and 7 shillings/ha). The profit made amounted to £ 31,634 and was 68.20 % of the average value of the grain production at the time, but it also included the deduction of other expenses relating to the maintenance of the estate.⁴¹

A simple comparative look shows that about 70 % of Belgium's agricultural land was cultivated with grain because of the lowland relief and the need for consumption and export. However, the port of Antwerp became an important centre for handling foreign grain, greatly supporting Belgium's economic growth. The additional contribution of grain to the small Belgian kingdom gave rise to a new crisis: falling prices. The economic situation was felt hard by small Belgian farmers. The increase in the industrial workforce at the end of the nineteenth century was caused by the fall in

39 László MAKKAI, *Neo-Serfdom: Its Origin and Nature in East Central Europe*, *Slavic Review* 34 (2), 1975, pp. 225–228; B. MURGESCU, *România și Europa*, pp. 103–150.

40 V. AXENCIUC, *Evoluția economică a României*, vol. 2, p. 80.

41 Data calculated based on statistics from 1906 (converted by us from lei to pound sterling), in: V. AXENCIUC, *Evoluția economică a României* 2, pp. 261–263, 303–304, 707.

farmers' wages.⁴² Also, larger farmers felt difficulties for different reasons: on the one hand, the prices they received for their products dropped (Agricultural Invasion), on the other hand, labour became more expensive due to competition from industry (agricultural labourers drawn away from agriculture, attracted by high industrial wages), and in some regions, seasonal labour migration to France and commuting to industrial regions. The historiography of the issue provides enough details to understand that after 1884, the Catholic Party gave advantages to the industrialists because of the gains that the Belgian state could obtain by favouring imports of cheap grain from Eastern Europe and Latin America. To these imports, one must add the non-competing products (i.e. agricultural products but not grain) that Belgium received from African colonies such as the Congo.⁴³

Despite the facilities of agricultural loans granted to farmers, even the big European consumers in Belgium's vicinity, such as France and Germany, have not offered more substantial advantages to local farmers. Industrialisation policy was more attractive and dictated by the ruling class in Brussels.⁴⁴

The organisation of the grain trade at the Lower Danube: the route from the large estates to the European entrepôts

Throughout the nineteenth century, the grain market at the mouth of the Danube underwent profound transformations in its complex functioning mechanism. Shortly after the Treaty of Adrianople (14 September 1829), the impact on the world of entrepôts required that the Moldo-Wallachian production structures and the

42 Leen Van MOLLE, *Katholieken en landbouw: landbouwpolitiek in België 1884–1914*, Leuven 1989, pp. 273–276; J. GADISSEUR, *Le produit physique de la Belgique 1830–1913: Présentation critique des données statistiques. Introduction générale. Agriculture. Histoire Quantitative et Développement de la Belgique IV/1a*, Bruxelles 1990; J. BLOMME, *The Economic Development of Belgian Agriculture: 1880–1980. A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis*, Studies in Social and Economic History 25, Leuven 1993, pp. 123–148; W. RONSIJN, 'Gaining ground' in Flanders after the 1840s: access to land and the coping mechanisms of landless and semi-landless households, c. 1850–1900, in: C. Fertig – R. Paping – H. French (eds.), *Landless households in rural Europe, 1600–1900*, Boydell & Brewer, pp. 91–116.

43 P. DELFOSSE, *La politique agricole de l'État belge en période de crise au XIXe siècle: les rapports de force dans une société en transition vers le capitalisme industriel*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Cehides 1983; Eric VANHAUTE – Leen van MOLLE, *Belgian agrarian and rural history, 1800–2000*, in: Erik Thoeland – Leen van Molle (eds.), *Rural history in the North Sea area. An overview of recent research (Middle Ages-beginning twentieth century)*, Tournhout 2006, pp. 225–256; W. RONSIJN – E. VANHAUTE, *From the hungry 1840s to the dear 1850s: the case of Belgium's food price crisis, 1853–56*, *Agricultural History Review* 66 (2), 2018, pp. 238–260.

44 R. PERREN, *Structural Change and Market Growth in the Food Industry: Flour Milling in Britain, Europe, and America, 1850–1914*, *Economic History Review* 43 (3), pp. 420–437; Rita ALDENHOLFF-HÜBINGER, *Deux pays, deux politiques agricoles? Le protectionnisme en France et Allemagne (1880–1914)*, *Histoire et Société Rurales* 23 (1), 2005, pp. 65–87.

organisation of domestic trade adapt to the rigours and requirements of the international market. Western trading houses, through their middlemen, penetrated deeply into the internal grain trade of the Lower Danube and influenced the way producers cultivated and marketed grain. The grain's route from the large estates to the entrepôts in the major European ports was complicated and involved a host of external factors that dictated the quality and price of the products. Until the mid-1870s, Moldo-Wallachian grain was temporarily stored in pits or rudimentary warehouses on the estates of landowners, and then transported on land over short distances or, thanks to inland rivers and the river Danube, to the main ports of the Maritime Danube (Brăila, Galați and Sulina). After the construction of the backbone of the Romanian railways, especially grain from the north of Moldavia, internationally recognised for their superior quality, were more easily included in the maritime trade circuit. Thus, export capacity increased substantially as export quantities increased and domestic transport costs fell. With the advent of the railways, there was a 30–35 % increase in the export potential of grain, which would have been lost to the international market because of the shortages caused by poor transport and the lack of storage space.⁴⁵

The railway network of the Old Kingdom of Romania⁴⁶ made significant progress in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, from about 900 km to 3,100 km. Between 1876 and 1880, 37,620,000 q⁴⁷ of grain, which represented 65.65 % of the whole quantity of goods, were transported by the local railway network. The downward trend of the ratio, in relation to the other products that used the railways in Romania, became more pronounced in the following decades, reaching an average of 40.77 %, although, in quantitative terms, the total increased substantially between 1911 and 1914.⁴⁸ High-capacity rail transport in Romania sparked off a faster production process and created new European possibilities for Romanian agriculture.

Trade in local stockyards, strategically set at regular distances and in the main regions dominated by grain crops, developed considerably in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. At the same time, most rural railway stations began to be equipped with small, rudimentary storehouses for the temporary storage of grain. Romania had become a spider's web spun out of the small offices of the middlemen

45 Victor AXENCIUC, *Formarea sistemului industrial modern în România. Etapa 1859–1914. Demarajul industrializării*, Bucharest 2008, p. 61.

46 The Old Kingdom of Romania was proclaimed in 1881 and was composed of the historical regions: Oltenia, Wallachia, Dobruja and Moldavia between the Carpathian Mountains and the Prut River.

47 1 q = 1 quintal = 100 kilograms.

48 Analysis made based on statistical data provided in: Victor AXENCIUC, *Evoluția economică a României. Cercetări statistico-istorice 1859–1947 1. Industria*, Bucharest 1992, pp. 321, 329–330.

of Western trading houses and connected to the country's land and navigation infrastructure. Grain would quickly flow from every corner of Romania to the warehouses and ships in the ports of the Maritime Danube. Most of the time, the quality of grain was neglected to the detriment of a substantial and profitable export, achieved by circulating the capital acquired in frequent transactions.⁴⁹

Grain cabotage from the Danube fluvial ports was a profitable business for shipowners. As the number of ships involved in the maritime transport of grain from the mouth of the Danube increased, cargoes under the western flag were supplied in the port of Sulina by a large number of river ships. These created a conveyor belt between the upstream Danube settlements and the port at the mouth of the river. The Greek Stephanos Theodōros Xenos⁵⁰ (mid–nineteenth century) and the Sephardic Jewish Mendl family (after 1880)⁵¹ are cases of entrepreneurial success due to the exploitation of a new opportunity in the Lower Danube grain market: cabotage between the Danube fluvial ports and Sulina.

The dominance of the grain trade in Romania's economy required the adaptation of domestic legislation and the creation of a climate conducive to Romanian exports in this sector. The trading codes, navigation codes, and international trade treaties adopted by the political class in Bucharest were influenced by the profoundly grain-based nature of the Romanian economy. After the suppression of the free port regime (1883), the authorities in Bucharest introduced the warehouse system in the ports of Galați and Brăila, which was difficult to implement, after a series of problems caused by the lack of infrastructure, towards the end of the nineteenth century. The advent of the docks revolutionised and imposed radical changes on the world of grain merchants in the Danube hinterland.⁵²

49 C. CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării*, pp. 183–235.

50 Stephanos Theodōros XENOS, *Depredations; or Overend, Gurney and Co, and the Greek and Oriental Steam Navigation Company*, London 1869.

51 See extensive coverage in: C. CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării*, pp. 183–236, 360–371.

52 On 18 Feb. 1883, the Ministry of Finance considered the creation of a warehouse service in Brăila, Galați and Constanța. The Romanian authorities should have implemented this project on 1 April of the same year, but the context of the time delayed the start of the work necessary to bring the Romanian ports in line with the standard of warehouse ports in Western Europe [see: Constantin BUȘE, *Comerțul exterior prin Galați sub regimul de port franc (1837–1883)*, Bucharest 1976, pp. 185–186]. For the customs duty situation in major European markets, see an extensive analysis in: E. SCHREMMER – W. STERN, *Chapter 5: Taxation and Public Finance: Britain, France, and Germany*, in: Peter Mathias – Sidney Pollard (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire 8. The Industrial Economies: The Development of Economic and Social Policies*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 315–494; Maarten Van DIJCK – Tom TRUYTS, *The Agricultural Invasion and the Political Economy of Agricultural Trade Policy in Belgium 1875–1900*, KU Leuven Center for Economic Studies Discussion Papers, January 2014, pp. 1–38.

Over three decades, the cumulative quantity of goods stored in warehouses in Brăila and Galați increased more than 27 times. From an average annual quantity of 130,300 q, stored in the two warehouses between 1884 and 1885, it rose to 3,583,330 q/year between 1910 and 1915. The quantities of goods stored in the Galați warehouse exceeded those in the docks of Brăila every year. The investments of the Romanian state in the construction of railways also changed the grain purchasing pools in the port of Brăila. In the years before World War I, the grain arriving in Brăila by rail, even from the northern regions of Moldavia, exceeded the quantities arriving on the Danube from upstream. The introduction of large cargoes on the Lower Danube grain market meant that grain from Oltenia and Wallachia had to be transhipped to the port of Sulina. By the end of the nineteenth century, the two ports had already specialised: Galați for imports and Brăila for exports (mainly grain).⁵³

Tariffs and trade policy measures

During the period of application of the Organic Statutes in Wallachia and Moldavia (1831/1832–1856), tariffs imposed on the export of Moldo-Wallachian grain varied between 2.5 and 5 % of the value of the products. From 1 January 1860, the system of leasing customs houses was abandoned, and the state began to operate them. Also on that date, the common customs rules, the status of the customs officer, the exchange rate of foreign currencies were regulated, the status of the ports of Brăila and Galați as free ports was recognised and a 5% *ad valorem* tax was adopted for the export of most of the products of the economy of the Romanian Principalities. Export duties were reduced to 3% *ad valorem* in 1866, and in the following two years they fell to 2 %, respectively 1 %.⁵⁴

Romania remained under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire until 1877, but from 1874 it developed an autonomous trade policy with a tariff that came into force with the law of 1 July 1876. The trade treaty signed with Austria-Hungary (22 June 1875) entered into force on 19 June 1876 for a ten-year period, allowing Austrian-Hungarian products to enter Romania free of charge. In reality, the treaty was made on liberal bases and with numerous concessions of the underdeveloped Romanian

53 C. CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării*, pp. 221–225; see also Constantin ARDELEANU, *Romania's Investments in Its Maritime Ports (1878–1914)*, in: idem and A. Lyberatos (eds.), *Port Cities*, pp. 129–164.

54 Constantin I. BĂICOIANU, *Istoria politicii noastre vamale și comerciale de la Regulamentul Organic și până în prezent I/1*, Bucharest 1904; N. N. CONSTANTINESCU, *Acumularea primitivă a capitalului în România*, Bucharest 1991; Nicolae SUTĂ – Gabriela DRĂGAN – Maria MUREȘAN – Sultana SUTĂ-SELEJAN, *Istoria comerțului exterior românesc*, Bucharest 1996, pp. 78–79.

economy to the clearly dominant Austrian-Hungarian one. After 1885, the Romanian government introduced a number of protectionist measures, but they were quite limited and triggered a customs war between Bucharest and Vienna, which lasted from 1886 to 1892. The duties levied by the Romanian state on grain exports remained insignificant (approx. 1–2 %) until the First World War.⁵⁵

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Belgian import duties on manufactured goods averaged about 15–20 % *ad valorem* and about four percent in the case of grain.⁵⁶ The introduction of universal male suffrage in Belgium (1893) provided new opportunities for farmers to influence local agricultural policy in the context of American grain imports. The Catholic Party played a decisive role in Belgian agricultural policy between 1880 and 1914, as some analysts of the issue have pointed out, ‘contributing to the adaptation of farms to the new market situation’ and securing many votes from the rural population.⁵⁷ Belgium’s fiscal policy oscillated according to its own needs and culminated in protectionist measures imposed after the Catholic Party returned to government in 1884. The political choices of the majority and the entrepreneurial visions of the elected representatives led the Catholic Party to chart the course of economic policy in the Belgian Kingdom. In this context, the accelerated pace of growth in grain imports in the main Belgian ports dictated the retention of relatively low grain taxes.⁵⁸

If the large landowners in Romania were able to obtain loans much more easily, the situation was quite different for small and medium-sized holdings, which ensured the subsistence of the population and agricultural workers. Despite the encouraging measures taken by the Romanian authorities, agricultural loans for small producers remained a sensitive issue for all the governments in Bucharest. Peasants, for the most part, avoided taking loans because of the burdens to which they would have been exposed or, in most cases, were unable to access the system of loans granted by the

55 Constantin I. BĂICOIANU, *Câteva cuvinte asupra politicii noastre vamale și comerciale de la 1875 până în prezent*, Bucharest 1901; V. Th. IORDACHESCU, *Evoluția politicii și legislației vamale a României, de la 1886–1904*, Bucharest 1936; C. CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării*, pp. 285–334.

56 Paul BAIROCH – Susan BURKE, *Chapter 1: European trade policy, 1815–1914*, in: P. Mathias – S. Pollard (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History* 8, pp. 32–33; M. Van DIJCK – T. TRUYTS, *The Agricultural Invasion*, pp. 5–34.

57 E. VANHAUTE – L. van MOLLE, *Belgian agrarian and rural history, 1800–2000*, pp. 224–226.

58 B. R. MITCHELL, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970*, London 1975, pp. 614–619; also see *Annuaire Statistique de la Belgique 1885*, Brussels 1886, p. 380.

state to develop small domestic farms.⁵⁹ In order to increase trade activities between Belgium and Romania, *Banca Creditul Belgo-Român* (the Belgian-Romanian Loan Bank) was founded at the end of the nineteenth century. The bank was destined to finance grain transactions and had a capital of around £ 1 million. The headquarters of the bank were established in Brăila.⁶⁰ Romania adopted a new national monetary system in 1867, which remained stable until the First World War.⁶¹

Quantitative aspects of navigation and trade

An overview of the statistical data supports the claim of a low level of Belgian navigation and trade at the mouth of the Danube until the 1880s. With some occasional exceptions, the presence of Belgian-flagged vessels in the Lower Danube averaged two to three ships registered annually in the port and harbour of Sulina. In 1859, with the help of the governments of Bucharest and Iași, the long-standing requests of the Antwerp Chamber of Commerce were met by opening a direct navigation line connecting the main Belgian port with Brăila and Galați. The positive effect of the opening of this maritime route was quickly apparent, with an increase in the number of Belgian-flagged vessels present in the two major Romanian ports. The main products imported by Belgium from the two Romanian Principalities remained grain, in exchange for which Belgian merchants placed large quantities of refined crystallised sugar, glass, iron and metalwork products on the Lower Danube market.⁶² What were the causes?

Belgium's independence in 1830 led to a protectionist reaction from its government due to three main factors. Firstly, the traditional protectionist tendencies of the cotton

59 Emil COSTINESCU, *Extras din expunerea de motive la proiectul de lege al băncilor populare al ministrului finanțelor*, Monitorul Oficial al României, March–April 1903, p. 822; Virgil MADGEARU, *Structura și tendința băncilor populare în Vechiul Regat*, Bucharest 1914; Marius PANAIT, *Evoluția creditului agricol în Vechiul Regat (1881–1914). Studiu de caz: Băncile populare din județul Brăila*, Analele Brăilei 8, 2007, pp. 51–70; C. CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării*, pp. 293–295.

60 C. I. BĂICOIANU, *Câteva cuvinte asupra politicii noastre vamale*, p. 72.

61 Before 1867, when the new leu was introduced in Romania, the quotation of coins was at different and variable levels. A gold coin was worth 32 lei, the napoleon 20 French francs or 54 lei, the pound sterling was worth 25.20 French francs or 68 lei. The adoption of the new national monetary system, with the leu-bimetal (gold and silver) standard, was fixed at 0.3226 g gold or 5 g silver, identical to the French and Swiss francs. The equivalence with the previous coin, based on the metallic standard, was: 100 new lei = 270 old lei; 1 gold coin = 11.75 new lei; 1 French franc = 1 new Romanian leu. After 1867, the Romanian coinage was related to the other imported coins of that time as follows: £ 1 = 25.25 lei; \$ 1 = 5.18 lei; 1 German mark = 1.24 lei; 1 French/Swiss franc = 1 leu. [See: C. SUTĂ et al., *Istoria comerțului exterior românesc*, p. 92; Costin C. KIRIȚESCU, *Sistemul bănesc al leului și precursorii lui 1–2*, Bucharest 1964; Victor AXENCIUC, *Avuția națională a României. Cercetări istorice comparate 1860–1939*, Bucharest 2000, p. 19].

62 P. BEKE (ed.), *175 ani de relații diplomatice româno-belgiene 1*, p. 101.

mill owners in Ghent manifested themselves, and secondly, independence led to the closure of Dutch colonial markets to Belgian products. Lastly, Belgian farmers demanded a higher protection than the one provided by the Dutch tariff of 1822, which provisionally applied to Belgian foreign trade. The law of 31 July 1834 introduced a sliding scale for grain and increased import duties on flax, hemp, and hemp cloth from 1.5 to 15 %. In addition to these tax increases, the Brussels government took measures to encourage industrialisation through subsidies, particularly for the coal and cotton industries. The law of 5 February 1834, backed up by that of 7 March 1837, refunded import duties on machinery and equipment to all manufacturers who moved their factories to Belgium and to any Belgian or foreigner who brought new machinery and equipment into the country. The system of preferential tariffs for goods imported on Belgian-flagged ships was abolished by the law of 19 June 1856 and did not lead to an exponential expansion of the national merchant fleet. In relative terms, the Belgian fleet accounted for 0.25 % in 1840, about 0.28 % in 1856 and only 0.19 % in 1870 of the world total, while Belgium's share of exports followed an upward trend from 1.9 to 3 percent from 1840 to 1870. Import tariffs on grain were around 4 % of the declared value of the commodity's purchase.⁶³

The most profound changes in the European economy took place in the 1860s–1880s, when imports of grain and grain/cereal products (including flour) into Belgium, France, and Germany increased on average from around ten million q per year (average 1862–1866) to 75 million q (1888–1892). In relative terms, these imports represented about 3 % of the average local production of these countries (1862–1886) and soared towards the end of the nineteenth century to 22 % (1888–1892). At the same time, these imports ran in parallel with the three countries' exports. Belgium, France, and Germany exported significant quantities of grain, reaching approx. 5 percent of their own production on average in 1862–1866, but fell to 2 % in 1888–1892.⁶⁴ In the 1860s through the 1880s, grain accounted in relative terms for 35–40 % of all agricultural production in the industrialised countries of continental Europe, and the replacement of 22 % of these countries' grain production by imports involved the development of a complex mechanism: the identification and exploitation of hinterlands, but also the use of nearby forelands.⁶⁵ Bread was made at sea, as some

63 P. BAIROCH – S. BURKE, *Chapter 1: European trade policy, 1815–1914*, pp. 20–35; M. Van DIJCK – T. TRUYTS, *The Agricultural Invasion*, pp. 5–34.

64 *Ibidem*, pp. 1–38; R. ALDENHOLFF-HÜBINGER, *Deux pays, deux politiques agricoles*, pp. 65–87.

65 The importance of foreland for the West Black Sea trade has been demonstrated in: G. HARLAFTIS, *Black Sea Maritime and Economic History*, pp. 3–32; P. BAIROCH – S. BURKE, *Chapter 1: European trade policy, 1815–1914*, pp. 46–48; M. Van DIJCK – T. TRUYTS, *The Agricultural Invasion*, pp. 5–34.

researchers in the field would explain.⁶⁶

Normally, the fall in freight should have reflected considerably in the price of grain, but it did not fall in line with the reduction in transport costs.⁶⁷ Therefore, the trading houses imported not only to cover grain consumption in industrialised Europe but also to accumulate a higher profit than in the earlier decades. However, by 1880, Belgium and the Netherlands accounted for less than 2 % of total grain exports through the mouth of the Danube. The situation changed considerably at the turn of the twentieth century, highlighting some of the characteristics of the maritime trade at the Lower Danube.⁶⁸

In 1883, the preferential free port regime of the Romanian ports on the Danube and the Black Sea was eliminated. In this context, only two Belgian-flagged vessels sailed on the maritime sector of the Danube, representing only 0.13 % of the total number of ships operating on the Danube between Brăila and Sulina and only 0.37 % of their total tonnage. Statistics recorded the entry of other Belgian ships on the Danube maritime sector only in 1888, and their number alternated between zero and a maximum of four (1898) until the end of the nineteenth century. The first fifteen years of the twentieth century saw a share of between 0.59 % (1906) and 2.28 % (1911) of the Belgian flag in the total number of active vessels on the Lower Danube waterway, with similar percentages in terms of total tonnage. Although Sulina became a strategic point on the map of European grain merchants, the situation was not totally different from that of ships entering the Maritime Danube and ranged from two vessels, with a total tonnage of 3,145 tonnes, loaded with grain in the Sulina harbour in 1883, to twelve vessels, with a total tonnage of 18,787 tonnes, operating in the port of Sulina during 1907. In terms of numbers and total tonnage, the proportion of the Belgian flag at Sulina ranged from zero, the most common value, to 1.5 percent, the maximum recorded in 1907.⁶⁹ It can therefore be said without a doubt that the transport of grain between the ports of the Danube and Antwerp was carried out by means of foreign-flagged vessels, the conclusive proof being the statistics available at the main Flemish entrepôt and port.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the transport of goods from Romanian

66 Tom G. HALL, *Cheap Bread from Dear Wheat: Herbert Hoover, the Wilson Administration, and the Management of Wheat Prices, 1916–1920*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of California 1971; Adina POPESCU, *Casting Bread Upon the Waters: American Farming and the International Wheat Market, 1880–1920*, unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University 2014.

67 See detailed reviews in: P. BAIROCH – S. BURKE, *Chapter 1: European trade policy, 1815–1914*, pp. 55–57.

68 C. CONSTANTIN, *Comerțul cu cereale la Gurile Dunării*, pp. 300–354.

69 Constantin ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația la Dunărea de Jos. Serii statistice (1881–1900)*, Galați 2008, pp. 200–211; idem, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, Galați 2008, pp. 60–65, 95–109.

ports to Antwerp was carried out via the regular route of the *Johnston Line* company. Navigation companies had agents in the ports of the mouths of the Danube. Representatives of the *H. A. Harris* Navigation Company handled Belgian imports from Constanta, and *Watson & Youell* the imports from Sulina, Galați and Brăila. After only a few years of operating the route between Romanian ports and Antwerp, *Watson & Youell* had to set up an office in Bucharest.⁷⁰ The costs charged for transporting goods to the port of Antwerp were much higher than for Rotterdam. Under these circumstances, the goods bound for Belgium were sometimes imported via the main Dutch warehouse. The exception was in 1896, when 226 ships arrived in the port on the banks of the Scheldt estuary from Romania, 108 more cargoes than those registered in the port of Rotterdam. Another advantage the Dutch had over the Flemish was the coal facilities, which provided the fuel needed to return the ships to their home ports.⁷¹ The *John Ruys et Slegens d'Anvers* navigation company, with a capital of four million francs, carried out transport on demand between the ports of the Black Sea (Odessa, Brăila, Galați and Sulina), the Mediterranean and Antwerp, using the six cargoes (steamers) it operated.⁷²

Alexandru Cotescu, director of the Romanian Maritime Service, a Romanian state-owned company, visited various navigation companies for the transportation of goods from Romanian ports to Antwerp at convenient prices. In this respect, he had a meeting with F. Bulcke, director of the port of Antwerp, and J. van Ryswijck, mayor of the Flemish city.⁷³ E. de Burbune de Wesembeek, 'of Romanian ethnicity', submitted a letter of intent to the Romanian plenipotentiary in Brussels, Bengescu, wishing to set up a new commercial agency for the import of Danube grain into the port of Antwerp.⁷⁴

In order to obtain convenient FOB (*free on board*) rates, but also to continue local relations, Al. Cotescu was forced to request offers from other agencies, such as

70 Arhiva Diplomatică a Ministerului de Externe al României (Diplomatic Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; hereafter, AMAER) in Bucharest, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul Român din Anvers (1881–96), fols. 1r–9r, Appendix to the Report of 14/26 Nov. 1896.

71 The quality of Belgian coal was inferior to that of the German or English coal, which brought discontent to merchants; see: AMAER, fund Haga, vol. 12, folder Rapoarte, informații economice (1897–1900), fols. 1r–5r, Economic Report no. 146.

72 AMAER, fund Brusselss, vol. 353, folder Consulatul român din Liege (1883–1942), fols. 25r–6r, Report of the Industrial and Commercial Congress in Liège.

73 AMAER, fund Problema 68 (Societăți de navigație fluvială, maritimă, aeriană: române și străine), vol. 7, folder Belgia: stabiliri de linii maritime româno-belgiene, societăți belgiene, reclamații (1887–1929), fols. 1r–3r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 27 Apr/8 May 1897.

74 His father, Hector, also of Romanian nationality, had an estate in Doreasca, Dorohoi County. His family was one of the wealthiest in the region. See: Telegram no. 4920, 19/31 March 1897, in AMAER, fund Problema 68 (Societăți de navigație fluvială, maritimă, aeriană: române și străine), vol. 7, folder Belgia: stabiliri de linii maritime româno-belgiene, societăți belgiene, reclamații (1887–1929), fol. 1r.

Casa Eiffe et Cie,⁷⁵ *Grisar et Marleilly – Ship Brokers & Forwarding Agents Antwerp*.⁷⁶ Despite the positioning of Antwerp as the main grain handling entrepôt in Europe, the authorities in Bucharest, interested in doing business in other areas with their Dutch partners, decided that the new line should have the port of Rotterdam as its final destination.⁷⁷



Figure 1. Advertisement for the Antwerp – Lower Danube route of the Johnston Line navigation company from 1896⁷⁸

- 75 Telegram no. 9914, 31 May 1897, in AMAER, fund Problema 68 (Societăți de navigație fluvială, maritimă, aeriană: române și străine), vol. 7, folder Belgia: stabiliri de linii maritime româno-belgiene, societăți belgiene, reclamații (1887–1929), fol. 1r.
- 76 The navigation company was based in Hamburg and had been navigation for more than 50 years on the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, specialising in grain transport. AMAER, fund Problema 68 (Societăți de navigație fluvială, maritimă, aeriană: române și străine), vol. 7, folder Belgia: stabiliri de linii maritime româno-belgiene, societăți belgiene, reclamații (1887–1929), fol. 1rv, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 27 May 1897.
- 77 The official representatives of the navigation company were Baron Lambert, Secretary General of the Belgian Foreign Department, and Léon Capelle, Minister Plenipotentiary and Director General of Commercial Affairs. Capelle was surprised that Romania had not opted in favour of the port of Antwerp, Europe's main grain entrepôt [AMAER, fund Problema 68 (Societăți de navigație fluvială, maritimă, aeriană: române și străine), vol. 7, folder Belgia: stabiliri de linii maritime româno-belgiene, societăți belgiene, reclamații (1887–1929), fols. 1r–3r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 11 September 1897]. According to statistics for 1888, transmitted by the Romanian consul Gustave Mendl in 1889, Austria-Hungary exported 5,577,797 q of Romanian grain to the port of Antwerp, worth 98,395,600 francs. The transactions were due to trade agreements between Belgium and Austria-Hungary [AMAER, fund Problema 68, vol. 374, folder Belgia, fol. 109r, Report from 8 June 1889].
- 78 AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul Român din Anvers (1881–1896), fol. 1, Appendix to the report from 14/26 November 1896.

In the 1881–1885 period, Great Britain and Austria-Hungary were the main importers from Romania, with 45.2 and 28.8 % of the quantities and 37.6 and 33.7 % of the value of the products respectively. Imports made by Belgium accounted for only 1.2 % of the quantities marketed in Romania and 1.3 % of its financial value. Belgium's exponential contribution to Romanian exports is also visible in the analysis of the five-year averages, which show a spectacular increase from an average of 1.2 (1881–1885) to 37.6 % (1896–1900).⁷⁹ Belgium must be seen as a transit country for many imported products, and, at the end of the nineteenth century, it had the largest grain entrepot in the world: Antwerp. Trading houses operating in Belgian ports purchased from Romania 'yellow wheat' (*bălanul bătrân*), with low gluten concentration, for Belgian consumption.⁸⁰

Massive capital investment in the Antwerp entrepot provided optimal conditions for long-term storage and maximum exploitation of the world grain market, and the proximity to Germany allowed the rapid placement of grain in the Rhine-Ruhr industrial region. Grain exports to Belgium amounted to £ 621,861 in 1887 and reached £ 1,730,040 within just three years. The redirection of Romanian grain to Antwerp is also described by the Romanian consul in this port. According to the diplomatic source mentioned, during 1889 only 2,486,510 q of grain, worth £ 1,587,842, remained in Belgian warehouses, the remaining 3,202,590 q, worth £ 2,196,467, being placed in Germany.⁸¹

The visible stocks of grain in the main Belgian, Dutch and German ports amounted to 1.8 million q in March 1897.⁸² Analysts of the time estimated the combined grain consumption of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany for 1897 at 22 million q, and forecast an import of 23.5 million q.⁸³ On average, Romania's annual exports to Belgium, dominated by grain, reached 8,042,330 q (37.46 % of the total) between 1896 and 1900 and represented approx. 3.705.149 £ (37.11 %).⁸⁴ In 1897, the Antwerp entrepot was the beneficiary of 4,763,720 q of grain arriving from the port of Brăila

79 The analysis was carried out based on a statistical series published annually by the General Directorate of Statistics of the Ministry of Industry and Trade in Bucharest. See: *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor în 1883*, Bucharest 1884, pp. 6–9; *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor în 1893*, Bucharest 1894, pp. 4–7; *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor în 1899*, Bucharest 1900, pp. 3–8; *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor în 1909*, Bucharest 1910, pp. 4–8.

80 Ion I. C. BRĂȚIANU, *Comerțul nostru de cereale și influența introducărei clasificării cerealelor asupra acestui comerț*, *Analele Ministerului de Lucrări Publice* 6, 1899, p. 319; Eduard GHICA, *Exportul nostru de grâne*, Bucharest 1902, p. 11.

81 *Ibidem*, p. 248.

82 Semaphore de Brăila: *Bulletin comercial al Portului Brăila*, 21 March/ 2 April 1897, p. 2.

83 Semaphore de Brăila: *Bulletin comercial al Portului Brăila*, 13/25 September 1897, p. 2.

84 C. ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația la Dunărea de Jos. Serii statistice (1881–1900)*, pp. 20–21.

alone.⁸⁵ The newspapers of the time reported that ‘the prices still high’ in the port of Antwerp had led to ‘more considerable daily arrivals [of wheat] and enormous loads from America and Russia, our buyers observe a well justified reserve’. Wheat prices were down by 0.75 francs/q (under one shilling/q) at Antwerp.⁸⁶

The statistical series compiled and published at the Romanian level are more conclusive starting from 1903 and allow a closer observation of the destinations of the grain exports carried out by the market of the Lower Danube. Between 1903 and 1914, grain products exported via the mouth of the Danube to Belgium totalled 83 million q, with an annual average of 6.9 million q. The lowest quantities were recorded in 1914 (2,686,980 q), while the most significant exports were recorded in 1906 (8,899,940 q), 1907 (8,168,940 q) and 1910 (9,670,410 q). The historical maximum of the era was reached in 1911 (10,646,150 q) and was dominated by the 5,889,210 q of wheat and 2,819,490 q of maize traded. In 1910, exports to Belgium accounted for about one-third of the entire grain trade through the mouth of the Danube (32,324,078 q) and, looking at Russian competition, 11.21 % of that through the entire system of ports of the Tsarist Empire north of the Black Sea (94,956,508 q) in that year.⁸⁷

In comparative terms, Belgium’s share of the international wheat trade from the Lower Danube reached 51.5 % in 1907, with 5,071,750 q out of a total of 11,579,240 q exiting through the mouth of the river, and surpassed Italy (1,697,540 q) and the Netherlands (1,614,490 q). The most significant export of grain in 1907 was maize, 14,016,690 q, where five major points of disposal or transit, with over one million quintals each, were Gibraltar (3,353,520 q; 24 %), Belgium (1,957,650 q; 13.96 %), Germany (1,866,550 q; 13.31 %), the Netherlands (1,685,260 q; 12.02 %) and Great Britain (1,325,760 q; 9.45 %).⁸⁸

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Antwerp entrepôt became the main destination and transit point for the world grain trade. According to contemporary Romanian sources, 2,930,000 q of grain were exported from Brăila to Antwerp in 1911, and the following year the total was 2,743,460 q. The share of the port of Brăila was

85 Buletinul Camerei de Comerț și Industrie circumscripția V-a Brăila, 27 May 1898, p. 38.

86 At the end of September 1897, there was a decrease of 1/2 shilling/q compared to the previous week. See: Semaphore de Brăila: Buletin comercial al Portului Brăila, 13/25 September 1897, p. 2.

87 Our review is based on statistical data from: Mose LOFLEY HARVEY, *The Development of Russian Commerce on the Black Sea and Its Significance*, unpublished PhD thesis, California University, Berkeley 1938; Gelina HARLAFTIS, *A History of Greek Owned Shipping: the Making of an International Tramp Fleet, 1830 to Present Day*, London 1996, pp. 16–17; C. Ardeleanu, *Comerțul exterior și navigația la Dunărea de Jos. Serii statistice (1881–1900)*, pp. 232–238; idem, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 110–126 (data converted by us from tchetvert and imperial quarters to quintals).

88 Ibidem, pp. 113–114.

27.52 % in 1911 and 38.52 % the following year.⁸⁹

Grains from the Old Kingdom of Romania were some of the most attractive for the world's largest grain warehouse. Romanian barley was the main supply in Antwerp's silos in 1913, and wheat and maize were second only to the United States of America and Argentina in Belgian preferences. In 1913, Belgium imported about 3.7 million q of wheat and 1.2 million q of barley from the Lower Danube grain market.⁹⁰ In 1913, Romanian wheat was sold in the port of Antwerp at prices between 17 and 19 francs/q (13–14 shillings/q), with Argentine products losing ground. Imports of Romanian rye into Belgian warehouses were very low, with prices varying between 14 and 15 francs/q (11–12 shillings/q).⁹¹

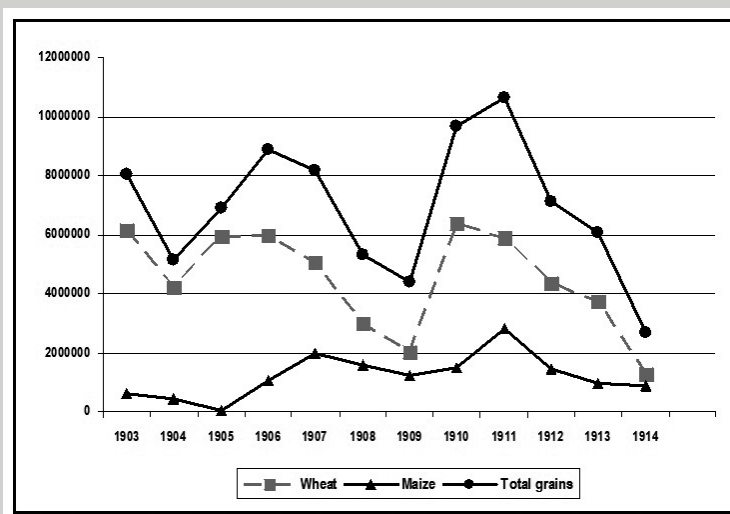


Figure 2. Grain products exported through the mouth of the Danube to Belgium (1903–1914). Quantities (in quintals)⁹²

89 Analysis based on data from Buletinul Camerei de Comerț și Industrie din Brăila circumscripția V-a Brăila 19, 1913, p. 627; C. ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 110–121 (total calculated by us based on the five products in the table).

90 Ibidem, pp. 110–121.

91 AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 15, folder Cereale-făină (1896–1921), fol. 1r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 5 January 1914.

92 Constantin ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 110–121 (total calculated by us based on the five products in the table) and Table 2 at the end.

The reputation of Romanian grain in Belgium

The Antwerp entrepôt had a great quality for grain grown in the Lower Danube region: it was a transit country for agricultural products. In general, the requirements of every European market were met. Rumours circulated in Belgium that Moldavian peasants were growing grain for tenants and landlords, providing a quality export commodity, while the Wallachians were mixing up all the produce, irritating foreign traders.⁹³ In 1889, at the request of grain importers from Austria-Hungary, the newspaper *The Times* published a rumour that Romanians were using the 'superior quality' of Pannonian grain to export large quantities to England, France, and Belgium. The Romanian authorities started investigations to verify the veracity of the sources, also with the help of the Romanian consul Gustave Mendl in Antwerp. The results of the investigation proved that the Western press was deliberately misled. P. Roels, President of the Antwerp Commercial, Industrial, and Maritime Society, certified the quality of Moldavian grain and its importance compared to that produced in other agricultural areas.⁹⁴ In 1886, at the Dresden Congress, it was noted that Romanian wheat grains produced 20 % more flour, containing a much greater quantity of water than Pannonian wheat grains, leading analysts to mix the Romanian product with that harvested from French, German and Hungarian farmland.⁹⁵

Antwerp traders bought 'yellow wheat' (*bălanul bătrân*) with low gluten concentration from Brăila, Galați and Sulina for Belgian consumption. The Swiss, the Bavarians, the English, and the consumers of central France preferred a glutinous bread, using a superior quality 'red wheat' flour from Moldavia.⁹⁶ Wheat rich in nitrogenous or proteinous substances usually contains a large amount of gluten, which is essential for making high-quality bread and flour. Flour produced from low-gluten wheat, which is difficult to process, results in bakery products that do not puff up and remain broader. The nutritional quality of this bread is mediocre. The regions of Moldavia on the banks of the Prut (Iași and Fălciu counties) offered the wheat richest in nitrogenous substances, with over 14 %. Counties in Wallachia had much lower percentages. Analyses carried out based on the 1900 harvest show that grain from the Dobruja region are the richest in gluten, due to the cultivation of *arnăut*

93 AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul român din Anvers, fols. 1r–2r, Telegram no. 259/ June 1889.

94 According to the centralisation of statistics from 1888, a total quantity of 4,718,623 q of Romanian grain (rye, barley, oats, peas and flour) was imported through the port of Antwerp; in: *Independance Belge* 28 November 1889, p. 5.

95 AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 374, folder Legațiunile României privitoare la exportarea din România grânelor, făinelor, fasolei etc. (1880–1894), fol. 70r, Annex to the Report of 31 May 1889.

96 I. I. C. BRĂȚIANU, *Comerțul nostru de cereale și influența*, p. 319; E. GHICA, *Exportul nostru de grâne*, p. 11.

wheat, a very 'glassy' grain used mainly in the pasta industry. According to the Romanian sources identified, there was no percentage differentiation in the presence of gluten between producers.⁹⁷

The growing commercial interest in Belgium for Romanian grain did not change the general opinion about them: Romanian wheat was the dirtiest and full of impurities among those that arrived in Western Europe. As a rule, in order to make a higher profit and to be able to sell their goods quickly and at decent prices, traders in the ports of the Lower Danube preferred to mix the grains together, hiding the dubious quality of the products from the eyes of the unaware.⁹⁸

Honesty in the Lower Danube grain market

The Jewish merchant Gustave Mendl was appointed Consul General of Romania in Antwerp by the Bucharest authorities because of his profession and the experience gained as owner of the trading house that bore his name.⁹⁹ As a rule, the economic reports of diplomatic attachés did not only contain statistics and figures of the business conducted. The evolution of Romanian-Belgian relations from an agricultural point of view was not always regulated by the two governments, fluctuating from year to year. From the research carried out so far, we have not identified in the literature or in the archives any tensions reported by the authorities in Brussels or Bucharest. In 1891, Frédéric Hoorickx, Belgium's minister plenipotentiary in Bucharest, warned Al. Lahovary about the 'gambling exchange' published in the Antwerp newspaper *Le Précurseur*.¹⁰⁰ In their pursuit of a better price, Belgian negotiators such as *Verona & Co.* initiated a so-called contract with second and third-tier trading houses, 'by which they risk nothing'¹⁰¹ in the grain businesses they wanted to conduct at the Lower Danube and place in Belgium. Gustave Mendl considered that whatever the decision of the Court of Brăila on this case, the Belgian traders were not going to receive the Romanian grain on time because of the 'complete insolvency of sales in Brăila, which is not a matter of Romanian law'. The validity of the contracts was set by the negotiator, which prevented the Romanian authorities from intervening. Aware that complaints

97 C. ROMAN, *Calitatea grâului din recolta anului 1900*, Buletinul Ministerului Agriculturii, Comerțului, Industriei și Domeniilor 9–10, 1902, p. 13.

98 John H. HUBBACK, *Some Aspects of International Wheat Trade*, *The Economic Journal* 21, 1911, pp. 121–131.

99 Gustave Mendl was from Melnik, Bohemia; see: Rijksarchief van Antwerpen in Antwerp, fund Consuls, folder 345 (PAA 496), fol. 5r, Telegram no. 34/3 November 1888.

100 AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul român din Anvers (1881–1895), fol. 1r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 16/28 February 1891.

101 Ibidem, fols. 1r–2r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 6 March 1891.

would not change the outcome, Gustave Mendl drew the Romanian government's attention to the fact that in 1890 alone Belgium had bought grain from the Danube ports worth 105,300,000 francs (about four million pounds) thanks to the good relations it had enjoyed over the years.¹⁰²

Trade between the two countries was affected by the still rudimentary legislation and trade institutions in the Danube ports. Belgian stock exchanges were more attracted to dealing with other countries 'much more honest than Romania'.¹⁰³ A. Zerman and Iancu Corbu, owners of some local trading houses, were not charged by the Court of Brăila because of the non-existence of the 'gambling exchange' on the market of the same locality, a sign that 'many sales are still made on word of mouth, without any written proof'¹⁰⁴, although the Brăila Stock Exchange was inaugurated in 1883.¹⁰⁵ By contrast, all the leading trading houses offered contracts in writing, building trust and continuity in their relationships with their loyal customers. All these aspects, together with price fluctuations and additional costs, prompted the plaintiffs from the Belgian contractors to decide to give up on Romanian grain. The Belgian decision had a rather strong consequence, by suppressing a Belgian import at Antwerp of about 4,000 q between July and October 1890.¹⁰⁶

Danube grain was bought by German merchants in Antwerp for consumption by local German 'colonies' [i.e., communities] or sold on German markets.¹⁰⁷ Since 1894, the East German provinces were no longer required by national law to declare the origin of rye and imported a substantial amount, even from Romania.¹⁰⁸ The port of Antwerp was a transit point to the Netherlands and France, and Consul G. Mendl was instructed by the Bucharest authorities to submit periodic reports on the sale of grain in the main Belgian entrepôt. The documents referred to have not been found in the Romanian and Belgian archives, preventing us from accurately reconstructing the

102 Ibidem, fols. 2r–4r.

103 Ibidem, fols. 3r–4r.

104 Ibidem, fol. 1r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 18 Apr. 1891.

105 Gheorghe IAVORSCHI, *Istoricul Bursei de cereale Brăila (1883–1948)*, *Analele Brăilei* 1, 1993, pp. 41–53.

106 The Belgian contractors were: Alphonse Muybreeks, Comt. Janssens, A. Techner, M. Foul, J. Frideberg, Ed. Van Steense & Cie. AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul român din Anvers (1881–1895), fols. 1r–3r, Report to 'Monsieur le Consul Général de Belgique', dated 4 December 1890.

107 Ibidem, fol. 1r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 13/25 Jan. 1889.

108 R. ALDENHOLFF-HÜBINGER, *Deux pays, deux politiques agricoles*, p. 77.

buyers, amounts, and prices of the transactions carried out.¹⁰⁹

The last four years of the nineteenth century bring further dissensions for Romanian farmers and merchants, whose activity is encumbered by the rise in Belgian import tariffs by two francs (about two shillings) per quintal, in 1897. The sale of flour products posed a real challenge for the Romanian consulates in Antwerp, Brussels, and Ostend. The frustration of Romanian plenipotentiary G. Bengescu is obvious in his report sent in September 1897, which prompted a swift decision by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest. Al. Cotescu's decision to also visit the Hague without notifying G. Bengescu saddened the latter even more, as he was 'completely left out of the affair' following his massive efforts to conclude new agrarian trading contracts with merchants and official representatives. Even though the report gives the turnover that Romania had earned from exports, some 136 million francs, of which 122,500,000 francs from the grain trade and eight million francs from Belgian imports,¹¹⁰ G. Bengescu was unaware of the negotiations between the Romanian state and its Dutch partners concerning the export of oil and meat from Romania to the Netherlands. Al. Cotescu had signed a new contract with the *Müller* trading house in Rotterdam for the export of 750,000 q of grain annually, while Antwerp had purchased 820,000 q of Romanian grain for its own consumption only in 1896, which shows the massive involvement of Romanian representatives in supporting foreign trade.¹¹¹ Despite the Romanian plenipotentiary G. Bengescu's temperament, the reply of Foreign Minister Dimitrie A. Sturdza showed that it was not only Belgium's request that mattered, but 'what was more convenient for the interests of the Romanian Kingdom'. At the same time, D.A. Sturdza considers G. Bengescu failed to convince the Romanian authorities with relevant arguments to opt for the Flemish port as the terminus of the navigation company's itinerary.¹¹²

The Antwerp Chamber of Commerce responded firmly, publicly revealing that Belgian traders would not show the same interest in Romanian grain as in previous

109 The German rye export law was amended in 1902 and 1906. Rewards for local taxes were offered in 'import vouchers' to offset taxes and stabilise the price. See: AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul român din Anvers (1881–1895), fols. 1r–2r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 7/19 February 1889.

110 Ibidem, fol. 1r, Report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania from 11 September 1897.

111 AMAER, fund Problema 68, vol. 7, folder Belgia, appendix no. 710/1897, fol. 1r.

112 The 'German colonies' (communities) in Antwerp were among the reasons why the Romanian authorities did not want to accept the large Belgian entrepôt as the terminus of the navigation line, even though it had direct connections to North and South America. The port of Rotterdam had several trade lines with Indochina and Australia, representing a strong Romanian interest in developing new business opportunities. AMAER, fund Brussels, vol. 335, folder Consulatul român din Anvers (1881–1895), fols. 1r–3r, Telegram no. 17874, 10/22 September 1897.

years.¹¹³ Imports of Romanian grain to Antwerp continued to develop at high parameters also due to the transit through the port of Rotterdam. The increase in the quantities exported to the Dutch entrepôt led to a drop in freight rates to 5 shillings/10 q, a price which was extremely convenient for traders.¹¹⁴

In 1908, even the skilled merchant and diplomat Gustave Mendl became a victim in a typical case of swindling in the international grain trade in the Danube hinterland. G. Mendl bought 2,720 q of barley and one thousand q of cinquantino maize from Brăila with the intention of selling it in Antwerp. When weighed in the Belgian entrepôt, a shortage of 56 % of barley and 15 % of maize of the quantity registered at the time of export from the docks in Brăila was noted.¹¹⁵

The Mendl family, well established in the world of international trade, played a key role in placing grain from the Danube hinterland on the Western European markets. Victor B. Mendl was born in Brăila in 1859 into a family of Mosaic religion, dominated by the spirit of entrepreneurial professionalism that was to make his name. The company *L. Mendl et C-nie*, founded in 1850, was the main source of his family's income and operated in the grain trade.¹¹⁶ Their good knowledge of Romanian and Western economic realities led to their international renown. Various members of the Mendl family were appointed diplomatic representatives of Romania in some of the most important European ports of the time. Gustave Mendl held the dignity of Consul General of Romania in the Antwerp entrepôt, a position from which the King of Belgium decorated him in 1907 with the Order of the Iron Cross for his contribution to the signing of the 1907 trade treaty between the two kingdoms.¹¹⁷ The ceremony took place against the backdrop of the peasant uprising in the spring of 1907, in which the Mendl tenants in Brăila county were deeply

113 AMAER, fund Problema 68, vol. 7, folder Belgia, fol. 1r, Copy of the decision of the Governor of the Province of Antwerp of 6 September 1897.

114 Adevărul, 25 March 1911, p. 1; Constantin CHERAMIDOGLU, *Imaginea Serviciului Maritim Român în presa vremii, Dunărea și Marea Neagră în spațiul euroasiatic. Istorie, relații politice și diplomație* 3, 2021, pp. 96–112. See comparative analyses of the development of the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp (in the nineteenth century) in: Peter GROOTE – Jan JACOBS – Jan-Egbert STURM, *Infrastructure and economic development in the Netherlands, 1853–1913*, *European Review of Economic History* 3 (2), 1999, pp. 233–251; Reginald LOYEN – Erik BUYST – Greta DEVOS (eds.), *Struggling for Leadership: Antwerp-Rotterdam Port Competition between 1870–2000*, Heidelberg 2003.

115 Mesagerul Brăilei, 12 September 1908, p. 2.

116 See a short biography of Victor B. Mendl in Emil Octavian MOCANU, *Portul Brăila de la regimul de porto franco la Primul Război Mondial (1836–1914)*, Brăila 2012, p. 408. See also *Dezbaterile Adunării Deputaților* [Debates of the Chamber of Deputies], extended ordinary session 1903–1904, meeting of 15 April 1904, pp. 1125–1126.

117 Egalitatea Brăilei, 21 September 1907, pp. 2–3.

affected by the burning of the grain stores.¹¹⁸ In April 1909, Victor B. Mendl was appointed consul of the Kingdom of Belgium in Brăila, and in April 1911, consul of the Kingdom of Sweden, as a token of his managerial ability and knowledge of local economic realities. But, above all, the saga of the Mendl merchants and diplomats was a success story of European family ties, dominated by the entrepreneurial spirit.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

Once every 20 days, the inhabitants of the large European cities had to either avoid bakery products altogether or use Romanian grains. At the beginning of the 20th century, the share of Romanian grains in the imports of European entrepôts did not exceed 13 % and only 5 % of the total consumption of importing countries in Europe. If, for Western Europe, the importance of Romanian cereals was somewhat secondary, for the modern Romanian state, grain exports were of decisive importance and constituted about three-quarters of the value of Romanian exports between 1860 and 1914, ensuring the surplus of the internal balance of payments, the functioning and modernisation efforts of Romania.¹²⁰

Around 1900, the Old Kingdom of Romania, despite extensive initiatives to diversify its production branches, remained a state dependent on grain harvests and trade, while Belgium was anchored in a marked industrialisation, in step with the technological discoveries of the time. Gradually, throughout the nineteenth century, more and more Belgian farmers took to the new factories. The political class in Brussels learnt to manage the consumption needs of the domestic and nearby markets by turning the port of Antwerp into a grain storage and distribution centre for Western Europe. At the end of one of the networks supplying the Belgian entrepôt on the Scheldt estuary was the Lower Danube hinterland. An indispensable and mutually profitable connection was created between the ports at the mouth of the Danube and Antwerp.

The trade between the Lower Danube grain market and Belgium followed a rising trajectory, becoming more intense when the political, social and, most importantly, logistical context at international level allowed a rapid and consistent development of agricultural products flows between the Romanian Danube ports and the Flemish entrepôt. The propitious moment was recorded from the 1880s onwards and reached its historical peak around the First World

118 Constantin C. GIURESCU, *Istoricul oraşului Brăila din cele mai vechi timpuri și până astăzi*, Bucharest 1968, pp. 236–237.

119 Ion Șt. URSULESCU, *Valori ale patrimoniului evreiesc la Brăila*, Brăila 1998, p. 42.

120 B. MURGESCU, *Țările Române între Imperiul Otoman și Europa creștină*, p. 257–258.

War. The explanation for this trade boom is not to be found in the substantial increase in European grain consumption, as Paul Bairoch has shown, but in the opportunities that traders enjoyed towards the end of the nineteenth century: the attractiveness of the foreland on the west coast of the Black Sea and the modern entrepôt in Antwerp.

Between the two ends of their journey, Moldo-Wallachian grain were silent witnesses of the evolution of production structures, entrepôts, and transport infrastructure (by land, river, and sea). The second phase of the Industrial Revolution implicitly dictated the pace of structural transformations in European society, and the whole of the West Black Sea foreland had a significant impact on the typology of Moldo-Wallachian agricultural crops and exports through the mouth of the Danube.

Under these circumstances, in the first five years of the twentieth century, Belgium managed to achieve an average share of 42.58 % of the total quantities exported by Romania and 42.55 % of their value. Thus, Belgium dominated the market of wheat purchases from the Lower Danube. In 1907, 51.5 % of Romanian wheat exports were to Belgium. The scenario was attempted again at the end of the First World War but did not benefit from the same favourable conditions.

Table 1. Romanian exports to Belgium (1881–1915). Average quantities and shares¹²¹

Average / Values	Average quantities (quintals)	Shares of quantities (%)	Average values (thousands of lei)	Shares of values (%)
Average 1881–1885	191,840	1.19	3,024	1.37
Average 1886–1890	2,081,690	10.49	28,752	10.82
Average 1891–1895	4,307,150	19.54	58,225	19.54
Average 1896–1900	8,042,330	37.46	93,555	37.11
Average 1901–1905	13,006,870	42.58	153,453	42.55
Average 1906–1910	9,796,580	25.75	147,973	29.52
Average 1911–1915	8,639,840	22.95	132,380	21.87

121 *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor*, years 1881–1900, Bucharest 1882–1916; C. ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația la Dunărea de Jos. Serii statistice (1881–1900)*, pp. 20–21; idem, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 24–25.

Table 2. Grain products exported through the mouth of the Danube to Belgium (1903–1914). Quantities (in quintals)¹²²

Year / Quantities	Wheat	Rye	Maize	Barley	Oats	Total (the five products)
1903	6,141,780	328,680	631,060	817,420	138,700	8,057,640
1904	4,222,180	196,260	422,280	267,310	26,560	5,134,590
1905	5,921,560	152,120	45,430	672,840	110,380	6,902,330
1906	5,963,200	469,780	1,050,240	1,319,150	97,570	8,899,940
1907	5,071,750	118,360	1,957,650	953,090	68,090	8,168,940
1908	2,988,380	68,000	1,588,100	626,200	29,930	5,300,610
1909	2,007,160	54,850	1,252,720	973,800	121,170	4,409,700
1910	6,388,920	447,160	1,504,350	1,264,930	65,050	9,670,410
1911	5,889,210	359,220	2,819,490	1,420,400	157,830	10,646,150
1912	4,363,600	145,000	1,454,360	1,139,690	19,390	7,122,040
1913	3,718,730	110,450	978,330	1,211,730	35,140	6,054,380
1914	1,260,300	29,320	872,020	470,000	55,340	2,686,980

Table 3. Maritime navigation at the Lower Danube (1881–1915). Number of ships and tonnage¹²³

Year	Vessel type/ propulsion Belgium	Number of Belgian ships	Tonnage of Belgian ships	Total number of ships	Total tonnage
1881	Steamboat	6	6,494	1,711	793,545
1882	Steamboat	4	4,182	1,646	903,063
1883	Steamboat	2	3,145	1,444	831,486
1884	Steamboat	---	---	1,178	697,666
1885	Steamboat	---	---	1,432	895,824
1886	Steamboat	---	---	1,379	950,567
1887	Steamboat	---	---	1,678	1,203,683
1888	Steamboat	2	1,996	1,771	1,332,907

122 *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor*, years 1903–1914, Bucharest 1904–1915; C. ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 110–121 (total calculated by us based on the five products in the table).

123 *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor*, years 1881–1915, Bucharest 1881–1915; C. ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația la Dunărea de Jos. Serii statistice (1881–1900)*, pp. 200–203; idem, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 60–65.

Year	Vessel type/ propulsion Belgium	Number of Belgian ships	Tonnage of Belgian ships	Total num- ber of ships	Total tonnage
1889	Steamboat	1	1,349	1,870	1,473,345
1890	Steamboat	---	---	1,828	1,539,445
1891	Steamboat	1	990	1,723	1,512,030
1892	Steamboat	---	---	1,532	1,427,087
1893	Steamboat	3	4,515	1,801	1,893,506
1894	Steamboat	3	6,899	1,716	1,619,703
1895	Steamboat	3	6,041	1,619	1,554,698
1896	Steamboat	4	10,724	1,713	1,794,934
1897	Steamboat	1	1,537	1,324	1,397,917
1898	Steamboat	4	6,148	1,419	1,476,119
1899	Steamboat	1	2,391	1,056	1,070,367
1900	Steamboat	2	3,081	1,101	1,252,509
1901	Steamboat	9	14,311	1,411	1,830,002
1902	Steamboat	11	17,503	1,579	2,302,980
1903	Steamboat	13	21,153	1,414	2,042,994
1904	Steamboat	10	15,919	1,009	1,477,054
1905	Steamboat	9	14,375	1,109	1,756,243
1906	Steamboat	8	12,848	1,349	2,275,812
1907	Steamboat	13	20,493	1,258	2,205,061
1908	Steamboat	11	18,346	1,010	1,607,627
1909	Steamboat	16	27,293	929	1,474,933
1910	Steamboat	33	51,569	1,307	2,274,493
1911	Steamboat	35	44,914	1,532	2,710,680
1912	Steamboat	30	44,068	1,008	1,788,156
1913	Steamboat	26	37,894	936	1,742,907
1914	Steamboat	26	46,786	718	1,356,090
1915	Steamboat	13	6,440	96	102,647

Table 4. Commercial ships loaded at Sulina (1881–1915)¹²⁴

Year		Loaded fully in port		Loaded partly in port, partly in the harbour		Total	
		Number	Tonnage	Number	Tonnage	Number	Total
1881	Belgium:	1	1,018	2	2,665	3	3,683
	Total:	160	162,241	53	66,721	213	228,962
1882	Belgium:	2	1,955	1	1,290	3	3,245
	Total:	287	294,255	122	153,963	409	448,218
1883	Belgium:	---	---	2	3,145	2	3,145
	Total:	225	245,586	62	81,069	287	326,655
1884	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	191	211,551	59	78,663	250	290,214
1885	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	230	257,089	44	57,667	274	314,756
1886	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	150	173,113	54	71,599	204	244,712
1887	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	207	230,561	84	112,756	291	343,317
1888	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	152	170,663	89	117,127	241	287,790
1889	Belgium:	---	---	1	1,349	1	1,349
	Total:	184	209,499	118	164,748	302	374,247
1890	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	178	204,073	131	190,318	309	394,391
1891	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	191	217,513	116	165,905	307	383,418
1892	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	130	144,713	75	118,532	205	263,245
1893	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	98	114,578	126	200,147	224	314,725
1894	Belgium:	---	---	2	5,362	2	5,362
	Total:	183	199,419	142	227,635	325	427,054
1895	Belgium:	---	---	2	5,362	2	5,362
	Total:	218	281,213	33	58,827	251	340,040
1896	Belgium:	---	---	4	10,724	4	10,724
	Total:	274	388,239	13	29,762	287	418,001

124 *Comerțul exterior al României și mișcarea porturilor, years 1881–1915*, Bucharest 1881–1915; C. ARDELEANU, *Comerțul exterior și navigația la Dunărea de Jos. Serii statistice (1881–1900)*, pp. 204–211; idem, *Comerțul exterior și navigația prin Gurile Dunării. Serii statistice (1901–1914)*, pp. 95–109.

Year		Loaded fully in port		Loaded partly in port, partly in the harbour		Total	
1897	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	305	428,611	3	6,553	308	435,164
1898	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	277	374,568	3	6,226	280	380,794
1899	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	220	292,352	2	3,473	222	295,825
1900	Belgium:	1	1,544	---	---	1	1,544
	Total:	187	298,048	6	14,421	193	312,469
1901	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	329	522,977	8	17,350	337	540,327
1902	Belgium:	2	3,287	---	---	2	3,287
	Total:	431	752,782	17	43,315	448	796,097
1903	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	277	480,468	26	67,672	303	548,140
1904	Belgium:	1	1,537	---	---	1	1,537
	Total:	275	497,910	11	32,267	286	530,177
1905	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	291	564,911	26	79,832	317	644,743
1906	Belgium:	8	12,848	---	---	8	12,848
	Total:	896	1,314,701	18	50,672	914	1,365,373
1907	Belgium:	12	18,787	---	---	12	18,787
	Total:	775	1,179,728	25	59,449	800	1,239,177
1908	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	294	518,720	3	8,167	297	526,887
1909	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	294	518,720	3	8,167	297	526,887
1910	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	155	280,115	2	4,308	157	284,423
1911	Belgium:	1	481	---	---	1	481
	Total:	536	1,073,285	10	25,337	546	1,098,622
1912	Belgium:	1	2,233	---	---	1	2,233
	Total:	536	1,073,285	10	25,337	546	1,098,622
1913	Belgium:	2	3,161	---	---	2	3,161
	Total:	349	697,579	5	16,183	354	713,762
1914	Belgium:	5	10,720	---	---	5	10,720
	Total:	265	584,289	5	17,245	270	601,534
1915	Belgium:	---	---	---	---	---	---
	Total:	5	2,060	---	---	5	2,060

Autor | Author

Cristian Constantin

'Bishop Melchisedec Ștefănescu' Centre for Danubian Studies (Brăila–Galați) of the Romanian Academy

Bd-ul Al. I. Cuza 180, 810025 Brăila

Romania

cristian.constantin@hotmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-0244-3860

Dr. Cristian Constantin (* 1989) is scientific researcher at the 'Bishop Melchisedec Ștefănescu' Centre for Danubian Studies (Brăila–Galați) of the Romanian Academy. He holds a PhD in History (2017) awarded by 'Dunărea de Jos' University of Galați, Romania. His research interests concern the social, economic, and diplomatic history of the extended Black Sea area (in the 19th and 20th centuries). He has published volumes on grain trade and foreign navigation companies on the maritime sector of the Danube, as well as scientific studies on the organization and functioning of foreign consulates in the ports of Brăila and Galați.

Summary

This study shows how grain produced in Moldavia and Wallachia were integrated into the international market in Antwerp. The research conducted so far does not include in-depth reviews of how Moldo-Wallachian production structures and the entire trade chain were boosted by Belgium's substantial grain imports. Beyond the classical historiography on the subject, this article draws on recent studies and unpublished statistical data from Belgian and Romanian archives. At the same time, it aims to show how the infrastructure of the western Black Sea foreland maximised the agricultural and commercial potential of the Danube hinterland. The paper contributes to the research on the expansion of the grain trade in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by looking at the contribution of Eastern Europe, more specifically, Romania. This would be a welcome addition, since existing studies often emphasise the contribution of Northern American grain, while that of Eastern Europe was also impressive. At the end of the 19th century, a connection was created between the ports of the Lower Danube and the entrepôt in Antwerp, a connection that was indispensable for the two ends of the network but also for the business environment. Once in the storehouses on the banks of the Scheldt estuary, Romanian grain was placed on the markets of Western Europe at the right time by the skilled merchants of the most important international trading houses.