
REVIEW ARTICLES

The Vistula and Poland's Trade in the XVIth and XVIIth Centuries

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In order to understand the nature of the problems which lie at the centre of current research, it is necessary to bear in mind the general situation of the Polish economy in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries, and in particular the respective roles of internal and external trade. At the time of the Renaissance, Poland entered a new phase of economic development, based on the great seigneurial estates and the corvée. The transit trade of an earlier period was now transformed into an export and import trade. Grain became the principal export commodity, followed in lesser degree by what were known as "foreign goods" — timber, ash and so forth. These goods were exported from Danzig, from whence they were carried, mainly by Dutch vessels, to the markets of the West and the East. In so far as it was navigable, the Vistula became the principal commercial route, and also an increasingly important means of communication. New commercial routes developed on the territory of the state, which brought Poland and Lithuania under the same jurisdiction, and of these one stretched from Russia through the towns of Masovia (Warsaw) as far as Greater Poland (Poznan) and even into Germany. The second ran from Moldavia and the Ukraine, through Lublin, the site of the great fairs, and through Masovia to the Baltic coast and Danzig. Cattle, hides, wax and other primary materials were exported to the West overland, and in turn cloth, metal goods, lace, wine and Mediterranean fruits were imported.

The decline of the Polish economy began in the XVIIth century. Although the exports of grain from Danzig were still considerable in the first quarter of the century, they then began to diminish. The wars of the mid-century, especially the savage war with Sweden, played a large

part in the collapse of the entire Polish economy. These economic difficulties, and especially the commercial problems, have been known for some time, and current research is mainly concerned with making the general explanations more precise and with exploring certain aspects which still remain obscure. The work of Miss Honorata Obuchowska-Pysiowa is particularly important in this respect, because she has published the customs registers which form the classical source, as it were, for the study of commerce.

The way in which these registers have been used is highly characteristic of Polish historiography. At the beginning of the present century interest in the customs registers increased amongst historians, and it was at this time that Miss Ellinger Bang began her famous edition of the Sund accounts. In the same period several minor or fragmentary editions of similar sources were also published. In 1915, however, a remarkable work appeared when Professor Stanislaw Kutrzeba of the University of Cracow published the registers of the duties charged on goods carried on the Vistula at Wloclawek (about 150 km north-west of Warsaw) between 1537-1576.¹ The registers were published in full, and only the order of the various entries was changed in order to group them by types of merchandise. This publication became a fundamental basis for a number of studies of Polish commerce in the XVIth century.

Professor Roman Rybarski of the University of Warsaw also produced a similar work in the inter-war years, a two volume study of Poland's trade and commercial policies in the XVIth century.² The first volume deals with various problems of Polish trade and the second is devoted to statistical appendices. The study was based on the records of a number of royal customs stations on the state's western frontiers. The documents were preserved in the Treasury Archive in Warsaw, and provided very extensive information. The author was forced to publish them in survey form, and omitted the names of the merchants, the transporters, and the less important destinations. But Rybarski's work also became an essential basis for all studies of Polish trade in the XVIth century and one of its principal sources. The war and the German occupation made the work even more precious. In 1942 Roman Rybarski died in Auschwitz, and in 1944 the Nazis burned down the archives and libraries after the Warsaw rising. All the records of the royal customs were lost — not only those which Kutrzeba and

¹ *Regestra thelonei aquatici Wladislaviensis saeculi XVI*, ed. St. Kutrzeba and Fr. Duda (Kraków 1915).

² R. RYBARSKI, *Handel i polityka handlowa Polski w XVI stuleciu*, 2 vols (Poznań 1928-1929 [new edn. Warsaw 1958]).

³ J. TOPOLSKI, *Rola Gniezna w handlu europejskim od XV do XVII wieku*, «*Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Wielkopolski i Pomorza*», T. 7/2: 1962, p. 5-78. [Summary in German]; M. Grycz: *Handel Poznania 1550-1650* (Poznań 1964).

Rybarski had worked on, but also those of the XVIIth and XVIIIth century which had not been studied. The loss was irreparable.

After the war Polish historians became interested in economic history above all else. The main task was that of replacing the lost sources with others which were, on the whole, less extensive. Jerzy Topolski and his assistant Marian Grycz published a study of the towns of Poznan and Gniezno in the XVIth to the XVIIth centuries, for example, based on the town account-books (*acta consularia etc.*). Although these contain only fortuitous information, the authors were still able to compile certain statistical series from them.

Other historians set out to discover the customs and *octroi* registers for the towns which were not under the jurisdiction of the Treasury Archive and which were sometimes preserved in local town archives. I have myself published the customs registers of the town of Cracow which were kept in the town archive and had not previously been studied. There are 136 volumes (*Regestra theloniei civitatis Cracoviensis*) covering the period 1589 to 1792. They are of central importance for the study of the overland trade, not only of Cracow itself but also for numerous other Polish and foreign towns which traded with Cracow. The registers have been used in recent years in various studies by Polish and foreign historians, especially Czechs, Slovaks and Rumanians. An important monograph on Cracow's regional market in the XVIth century,⁴ in which not only the town's foreign trade but also its commerce with its hinter-land is described, is based largely on these registers.

But if one leaves aside the records of the maritime customs posts at Danzig and Elblag, and apart from those of Cracow, only fragmentary series have survived, such as the customs books at Kalisz (1647-55), or the river-toll registers at Nowy Dwor (for 1662). There is, however, one remarkable exception, for Miss Obuchowska-Pysiowa succeeded in finding the customs registers of Warsaw, which fortunately survived the last war. These derive from the duties which the town of Warsaw imposed, by virtue of its royal privileges, from the end of the XVIth century. The registers were found in the National Archive in Warsaw (Archiwum Głowne Akt Dawnych) and date from the early XVIIth century (1605-51 to be exact, with several years missing). They refer to the river duties paid on the bank of the Vistula by merchants carrying goods to Danzig both up and down stream.

In 1964 Miss Pysiowa published a detailed monograph on Vistula trade in the early XVIIth century, which was based mainly on these records.⁵ The

⁴ J. MAŁECKI, *Studia nad rynkiem regionalnym Krakowa w XVI wieku*, Warszawa 1963 [French summary].

⁵ H. OBUCHOWSKA-PYSIOWA, *Handel wiślany w pierwszej połowie XVII wieku*, Wrocław 1964 [English summary].

study contains a descriptive essay and 71 statistical tables. The former contains five chapters, the first of which deals with the physical and technical aspects of Vistula trade, the second with its organization, and the third is a social analysis of the trade, in which the author examines the respective shares of the nobility, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry. In the fourth chapter the author describes the goods imported and exported along the Vistula, and in the final chapter she assesses the overall balance of trade. The statistical tables provide extensive information, and the essay is largely an analysis of this information. The study also contains a large map which indicates the main locations of Vistula trade in the XVIIth century.

The task which Miss Pysiowa undertook was by no means easy, and one only needs to remember that in order to produce uniform series it was first necessary to translate all the different measures used in this period to a standard form. But Miss Pysiowa succeeded extremely well in overcoming these problems, and she has been able, as a result, to reach conclusions which are both interesting and revealing, even though at times debatable. In the first place, she provided new information on the problem of the major periods of grain exportation along the Vistula and via Danzig. Historians using the Sund and Danzig sources are generally agreed that the peak came in 1618,⁶ but Miss Pysiowa suggests 1641. This shift of timing is important, because it would indicate that Poland's economic growth continued until the time of the wars of the mid-century. At the same time, Miss Pysiowa's claim is open to doubt, because the sources which she was using are not, on this point, more comprehensive than those from which the earlier date was deduced.

Miss Pysiowa's assessment of the trade balance is also open to question. In the final chapter she concluded that the balance of Polish trade in the mid-XVIIth century was remarkably favourable, or, at least, so the customs records seemed to suggest. In this case it is not so much the conclusion itself which gives rise to doubt, but rather the calculations (Table 69) and their results, show that exports were ten times greater than imports. This would seem highly improbable, and almost certainly results from the nature of the sources themselves. It is still, however, an interesting conclusion.

No less interesting is the description of the territorial distribution of the grain trade. The map shows clearly that not only the Vistula basin itself, but also the vast areas of Volynia, Podolia and the western Ukraine, were all involved in the cereal trade.

One aspect of the study which can be criticized is that it does not cover the whole of Poland, and in fact deals only with trade in the region

⁶ Cf. S. Hoszowski, *The Polish Baltic Trade in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries*, in «Poland at the XIth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Stockholm», (Warsaw 1960), p. 135.

south of Warsaw. The exports from the great towns of the Lower Vistula, Włocławec, Torun, Bydgoszcz and Grudziadz, remain outside its limits and unstudied. This is, of course, readily understandable when one bears in mind that the study is based on the Warsaw river duty registers. But another weakness of the same source is that it does not give very accurate numerical information. There are for example no records of the goods exempt from tax, not to mention those that were smuggled. Despite these reservations, however, it is still a study of exceptional value.

Miss Pysiowa's extensive research has given her the opportunity of treating a number of more specialised problems as well. In 1966 she published a short article on Vistula trade in the XVIIth century,⁷ which derived from some of her earlier research. She also published a more important study on navigation on the Vistula, its physical and technical aspects, and its organization in the XVIIth century,⁸ also based on the Warsaw tax registers. In this she again emphasised the importance of the Vistula for Polish trade, especially the export trade, and examined ship-building, the organization of labour in the ports situated on the Vistula, and also in shipping. In the region to the south of Warsaw these numbered about 28,000, which alone indicates the importance of the Vistula in the import and export trade of bulk goods.

Miss Pysiowa has also extended her research on the XVIth century, in particular on the export of timber.⁹ From the Middle Ages timber had been one of Poland's principal exports, and although less important than grain in the XVIth century it still involved very large areas of the Vistula basin and yielded huge profits for the king, for the great landowners and senior royal officials. The latter were often leading merchants from Danzig. Timber of all sorts was exported, oak, as well as other forestry products such as ash and yew.

After her extensive studies of the Warsaw customs registers, Miss Pysiowa began working on a similar but very much richer source, the customs registers of the town of Cracow. In particular, she has produced a detailed study of the register for a single year, 1604, chosen because there are other customs registers for the same year, most notably the registers for the royal customs posts on the western frontiers of the state. For some years now Miss Pysiowa has been working on a major study of Cracow's foreign trade in the XVIIth century from these sources, but so far

⁷ H. OBUCHOWSKA-PYSIOWA, *Rola Warszawy w handlu wiślanym w XVIII w.*, «Rocznik Warszawski», Vol. 7: 1966, p. 143-147.

⁸ H. OBUCHOWSKA-PYSIOWA, *Warunki naturalne, technika i organizacja splawu wiślanego w XVII wieku*, «Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej», A. 13: 1965, p. 281-297 [French summary].

⁹ H. OBUCHOWSKA-PYSIOWA, *O handlu drewnem w Polsce w XVI wieku*, «Sylwan», A. 108: 1964, N. 4, p. 55-64. [English summary].

has published conclusions touching on the trade in livestock.¹⁰ This entails studying another of the principal export routes. The first was the Vistula, the main route for agricultural and forestry products. The other is the "cattle trail" used by those headed for Cracow or elsewhere. Along this trail thousands of cattle passed in the XVIth and XVIIth centuries, heading for the great Silesian cattle fairs.

Until now there has been no way of estimating the value of this trade. XVIth century writers believed that there were two really important export commodities which brought wealth to Poland — the grain exported from Danzig and the cattle exported to Silesia. Some foreign historians have even suggested that the value of the cattle exports from Central Europe was several times greater than that of the grain exported from Poland and the Baltic states.¹¹ This is an argument, however, which requires quantitative verification, and from the Polish point of view would seem to be at least improbable. But we may hope that Miss Pysiowa's current research may bring us towards a solution of this problem.

¹⁰ H. OBUCHOWA-PYSIOWA, *Handel wołami w świetle rejestru celnego komory krakowskiej z 1604 roku*, «Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej», A. 21: 1973, p. 507-512. [French summary].

¹¹ Cf. O. PICKL, *Routen, Umfang und Organisation des innereuropäischen Handels mit Schlachtvieh im 16. Jahrhundert*, in «Festschrift Hermann Wiesflecker zum sechzigsten Geburtstag» (Graz 1973), p. 166.